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Wednesday, March 19, 2008



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**Scandals Bring Out Voters**

November 29, 2006 at 11:35 am by Rick Karlin

Scandals and negative campaigns are said to hold down voter turnout but that's not what happened in the 20th District battle between John Sweeney and newly elected Congresswoman Kirsten Gillibrand.

Paul Conti, a veteran TV newsman now teaching at The College of St. Rose in Albany made that point this morning during a panel discussion with local publicists. I had the pleasure of participating at the event put on by the local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. I noted that one school of political thought goes like this: negative ads turn people off to politics leading to lower turnout. But the 20th race saw a higher turnout than in other parts of the state.

Along with Conti, Brian Taffe of Capital News 9 and WGY's Read Shepard, we had an interesting time discussing the recent elections as well as that age-old question of whether the media does too much "horse race" rather than issues coverage when it comes to politics. Most of us agreed that there probably is too much horse racing stuff but no one had clear answers about getting away from that.

Also present were some Capital Region publicists including Ben Marvin of St. Rose, Ronald Kermani of the Higher Education Services Corp, Bonnie Betancourt, Joanne DeVoe, Dick Chady, as well as Tom Nardacci, and John Cordi from the Independent System Operator, which helps control the flow of electricity statewide.

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1. The horse racing happens because the politically involved, including campaign staffers and the journalists covering them, enjoy the horse racing and have an itch to scratch.

Maybe the Capitol Confidential blog can be a catalyst to moving the horse racing out of the mainstream articles, by focusing it here and second-guessing things before they go over there.

Of course, that also means more work for you: writing different material to cater to different audiences for different purposes. The quality solution is rarely the easy solution.

*Comment by Mac — November 29, 2006 @ 12:54 pm*

2. Two other myths:
  - 1) Newsmen like Conti, who has never been involved in running a race from start to finish, top to bottom; are political experts
  - 2) Negative Ads don't work and it's better for a candidate to be nice

The print media wants to sell papers, therefore the horse race approach, it's only natural.

*Comment by Independent — November 29, 2006 @ 1:39 pm*

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[Rick Karlin](#)

Joined Capitol Bureau in 2006 ... A reformed ski bum, Rick enjoys outdoor activities, reading.



[Irene Jay Liu](#)

3. Perhaps if there were more horses the other 50% would vote too.  
More horses = more issues. Fair ballot access means more horses.  
Do the right thing Eliot on day one . . .

Otherwise the cycle of either/or, lesser of two evils voting presumably makes little distinction in terms of issues, parties and candidates. Thus the horse race becomes sell able based on personalities, tactics and other tripe that is excused by publishers and editors as reporting.

This is why MSM blogs and panel discussions are so vapid. They can't step out of the boxes that the business cycle mandates. Assumptions about historic inevitability, exclusionary polls and media buys make the process ridiculous to the 50% whose consent is simply withdrawn. Spare us the yipes about apathy.

*Comment by ESun67 — November 29, 2006 @ 1:51 pm*

4. ESun67 (3):  
> More horses = more issues. Fair ballot access means more horses.

In case anyone is wondering, ESun is doing his usual opportunistic comment about how third parties are locked out. In this case, he's saying that making changing the system so that third party candidates are viable would allow a much broader, and truly representative, range of issues. This in turn would make all voters feel better spoken for, increasing optimism and promoting engagement.

I totally agree with you ESun.  
(PS - Are you that Eric Sundall dude?)

*Comment by David\_GP\_artist — November 29, 2006 @ 3:53 pm*

5. Click on ESun67 and you go to <http://www.ericssundwall.com/>  
And I would guess he was born in 1967

*Comment by Everyday People — November 29, 2006 @ 4:35 pm*

6. Rick Karlin (0):  
> Scandals and negative campaigns are said to hold down voter turnout  
> but that's not what happened in the 20th District battle between John  
> Sweeney and newly elected Congresswoman Kirsten Gillibrand.

Gillibrand's main Albany guru, NY congressman MacEneneny, stood by his advice to Gillibrand throughout the election: "If you sling mud, you are bound to get dirty."

The general wisdom is that the 20th was a mud-fest. It's true that Gillibrand ran negative ads, and that they were quite effective. However, I believe her campaign labored to remain positive.

1) She repeatedly requested a debate. Sweeney repeatedly came up with excuses and demands. It was clearly Sweeney's fault that something as positive as a debate never happened.

2) Issues: Gillibrand's website proudly displayed some very bold issue initiatives:  
a) Doubling CAFE to 60 within 10 years (this would force the bulk of cars sold to be hybrid or full-electric by then).  
b) Total troop withdrawal from Iraq, within 12 months.  
c) All US citizens be allowed to buy into medicare.  
\_\_ These aren't just issues, they are red hot positions. News headlines in the 3 weeks since the election show that these positions are strong departures not only from the Republican party platform, but hers as well.  
Such bold ideas require a positive candidate to propel them (and defend them). Sweeney fortunately spent little time away from his insinuations of her integrity to attack them. But others, like 21st' Warren Redlich, did.

3) "Get out the Vote" (GotV). Major local organizations such as Working Families, unions, and Sierra Club mobilized their members to aid her. You might say she had an army of volunteers, focussed on mobilizing party members, the undecided, and eventually even Republicans. There was a huge amount of door knocking and registration.

Keep in mind, So I think that if you look more closely at the Gillibrand campaign, you will realize that negativity was only supplementary to the strategy of the winning candidate.

*Comment by David\_GP\_artist — November 29, 2006 @ 4:41 pm*

Joined the Capitol Bureau in '08, a great year for politics ... a foodie, music junkie, and reader, recommendations welcome.



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7. BONNY Betancourt I think. I wondered what she was up to these days, aside from raising little fishies. What exactly is a “publicist” anyway?  
XXX

*Comment by Patty Hearst — November 29, 2006 @ [5:13 pm](#)*

8. Negative ads work, and for Sweeney’s camp to complain about it is ridiculous, since he did plenty of negative campaigning, in TV ads, scathing comments by his flacks, and through his hot-blooded surrogates here.

Let’s be real — Gillibrand had to attack Sweeney’s record, both political and personal, to more strongly make the case that she would be a better representative than him.

Otherwise she would have wasted a year of her life, and a couple million of her supporters’ money.

And Sweeney had to attack Gillibrand, to try to disqualify her early, with contributors as much as voters, and hopefully coast to another easy re-election. Campaign 101.

I ran into many voters at the doors who said they were put off by the negativity of the campaign, but that notional alienation was not borne out in the remarkably high off-year turnout.

Gillibrand talked plenty about her issues, and ran several positive issue-based ads.

But that would never have been enough to beat an entrenched incumbent.

She had to go negative, truthfully, in order to win.

*Comment by devtob — November 29, 2006 @ [7:05 pm](#)*

9. Thoughtful discussions....

For the record, I have indeed never been involved in running a campaign. Not at all. Never mind from start to finish. I only observed them.

I did not judge nor is it for me to judge the worthiness or the effectiveness of any campaign tactic. When I practiced journalism full time it was my job to observe and report on those tactics.

However, in response to several questions regarding the 20th Congressional District race and the campaign, which our “audience” described as “negative” I offered the following statistics.

Statewide, about 25% of the registered voters in the New York weighed in on their choice for Governor based on unofficial numbers from the County Boards of Elections across the state, which have not yet completed their official canvass. In the 20th Congressional District, based on the same reports, about 50% of those registered voted.

I suppose you can infer anything from that set of numbers. It does not mean that negative campaigning works. It does not mean negative campaigning doesn’t work. It means that for the room of people we addressed, who perceived the campaign in the 20th was negative, they got those statistics from me to weigh.

If you agree the campaign in the 20th was negative then you could conclude that negative campaigns may push turnout higher.

In any event the point of the original posters remarks were, I think, that stories and journalists tend to cover the “horse race” too often and not enough issues. Maybe true.

Here’s another observation from an “retired” journalist. These days, it is pretty difficult to get a candidate for Federal or Statewide office to “get off message.” You can ask any question you like. Usually the response will come back to reflect the message of the day.

I don’t know which came first: The chicken or the egg.

Paul Conti

*Comment by Paul — November 30, 2006 @ [11:47 am](#)*

10. What the ... an actual discussion in the comments? Is that allowed? I feel like I should step

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in for the campaign operatives around here and point out that as a former journalist, you were part of a traitorous, leftist industry, and I don't even have to know any of your work to say that.

Anyway, enough sarcasm. Mr. Conti, you said

These days, it is pretty difficult to get a candidate for Federal or Statewide office to "get off message." You can ask any question you like. Usually the response will come back to reflect the message of the day.

Clearly, this is one of the challenges that a reporter faces. However, I rarely see something like this in a news article: "The TU asked Candidate Critter about X, and Critter responded with Y. The TU asked about X in a follow-up question, and Critter responded with Z."

Instead, we just get the on-message quote and it looks to the reader like both the reporter and candidate are content with that little dance. Why not change the journalistic practice, and begin pointing out that the candidate simply is not answering the questions.

I mean, imagine if we had a president who always answered with straw man arguments and meaningless slogans. Oh, wait...

Sorry, more sarcasm. Anyway - your thoughts?

Comment by [Lame Man](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [12:12 pm](#)

11. Paul Conti (9):

> In any event the point of the original posters remarks were, I think,  
> that stories and journalists tend to cover the "horse race" too  
> often and not enough issues. Maybe true.

I agree, more coverage of issues sounds good. But I must admit, it did seem like nothing energized people at the end better than the 911 call. If only the public had greater respect for visionary ideas.

Comment by [David\\_GP\\_artist](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [12:45 pm](#)

12. In the interest of accuracy, just wanted to clarify that it was Jo Ann LeSage of Pierce Communications who was in attendance at the PRSA program, not Joanne DeVoe.

Comment by [Young curmudgeon](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [3:11 pm](#)

13. Clearly, this is one of the challenges that a reporter faces. However, I rarely see something like this in a news article: "The TU asked Candidate Critter about X, and Critter responded with Y. The TU asked about X in a follow-up question, and Critter responded with Z."

It's nice to sit here and pontificate now. This is the first time I've ever entered anything into a blog. Didn't feel it was fair to do that in my past life — or wise. But now that I am a faculty member at the College of Saint Rose I can be as opinionated as I want to be.

As far as running back to back to back comments from a particular candidate to demonstrate the idea that they stay on message I think you'll find The Daily Show does that quite frequently. It is generally considered an opinion show and they do it for the comedic value.

I'm trying to picture how a local TV station could do it or how Rick could do it in a straight story and not have it appear unbalanced. I confess that journalists obsess about that issue — the balance issue. There will be some people who read this who plainly will not believe it, but people who are committed to the craft are their own harshest critics.

In retrospect, I think there are times when we shouldn't have worried about the "balance" issue as often as instead offered insight. However, I also believe that if print or broadcasts journalists did that they would be accused of bias even more often than they are now, especially when reporting politics. Not that criticism is supposed to stop solid journalism. Sometimes it's your best indicator of when you are doing your job properly.

This probably doesn't answer your questions, but I am an academic now and I just raise more questions. It's your job to find the answers that satisfy you. 😊

Paul Conti

Comment by [Paul](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [7:33 pm](#)

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14. Reporters have a tough task ferreting out corruption, or getting politicians to tell the truth about anything when they'd rather not.

The prime example of this is Pataki's wife's extremely lucrative no/seldom-show jobs funded by Republican contributors.

Reporters asked about it several times, got the "nothing to see here, move along" response, and the story died.

To nail a corruption story, the media rely almost entirely on leaks from people on the inside who, for one reason or another, want the truth to get out.

They do not have subpoena power, so can only report what people willingly tell them.

Which almost always contains a good bit of self-interested truthiness.

The balance thing can be a real problem when one side is clearly telling the truth and the other side clearly is not.

The media are generally loathe to call out the liars, and too often end up publishing/broadcasting lies.

Call me quaint, but I believe the media should be reporting the truth, and not just what officials say.

And if the official liars and their supporters think that's "unbalanced," tough.

*Comment by devtob — November 30, 2006 @ [9:39 pm](#)*

15. I thought I made some insightful comments about the problems of the media, and then I read [this killer piece](#) by Dan Froomkin of the Washington Post.

As they say on the Internets, what he said.

Click the link to see why.

*Comment by devtob — November 30, 2006 @ [11:27 pm](#)*

16. In terms of third party candidates coverage, Fred Lebrun will claim that historic inevitability precludes their coverage. Rex Smith is chagrin to cover the noble citizen candidate for fear that they might have their egos fed, not their issues heard. Even Mr. Karlin admits that there is only so much much space for them. Stories about Sweeney's cigarette smoking and Gillibrand's stop sign incident are fine however . . .

Yet we see only the petty aspects of personalities of the duopoly because they hold the market share of the inertial voting body. They are also command attention with their buying power. The greater urgency of the polity should merit some limited coverage of these candidates. Presumably all the AG third party candidates have passed the Bar and merit some professional courtesy. Even the comptroller candidates (Green & Libertarian) commanded higher than usual results with little or no campaigning or coverage. Mr. McCourt made some headway, but even his Irish charm came up short.

Cultural elitism permeates the process in the common political and media channels. Fortunately the Internet provides alternative views and analysis. Unfortunately it will take another two generations of usage and advocacy before the tide can be turned on the last two generations that have indebted us for time immemorial.

*Comment by [ESun67](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [10:31 am](#)*

17. Better make that three generations. I plan on telling my children all about Ralph Nader and his third-party run in 2000. Message: guess what - there was a difference between the candidates - one of them invaded Iraq and created a hell on earth, the other one would not have been so careless and foolish.

*Comment by [Lame Man](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [1:08 pm](#)*

18. I tried to comment earlier regarding "the appearance of balance," but apparently the comment got lost in the tubes of the internets.

In a nutshell, I suggested that if a news org had a methodology or practice of saying "we asked X, and the answer we got was Y" and applied that practice across the board, then that

would seem to answer any questions of balance.

I guess that practice would raise an issue of a reporter placing herself in the story. My response to that issue would be - so what? A little less of the "voice of God" might be a good thing.

The internets allow any old layman to be a media critic - isn't it great?

*Comment by [Lame Man](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [1:18 pm](#)*

19. I finally went and looked as Eric Sundwall's bog (not sure I spelled the last name right). Yep, he's definitely the same guy called ESun67 who blogs here. No mistaking those obscure references and comparisons that hardly anyone can keep pace with (or verify).

*Comment by [David\\_GP\\_artist](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [3:40 pm](#)*

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