



Lessons of History?

Even among those who still invoke the lessons of history, some read those lessons very differently from others.

Talk show host Michael Medved, for example, apparently thinks the Republicans need a centrist presidential candidate in 2012. He said, “Most political battles are won by seizing the center.” Moreover, he added: “Anyone who believes otherwise ignores the electoral experience of the last 50 years.”

But just when did Ronald Reagan, with his two landslide election victories, “seize the center”? For that matter, when did Franklin D. Roosevelt, with a record four consecutive presidential election victories, “seize the center”?



There have been a long string of Republican presidential candidates who seized the center — and lost elections. Thomas E. Dewey, for example, seized the center against Harry Truman in 1948. Even though Truman was so unpopular at the outset that the “New Republic” magazine urged him not to run, and polls consistently had Dewey ahead, Truman clearly stood for something — and for months he battled for what he stood for.

That turned out to be enough to beat Dewey, who simply stood in the center.

It is very doubtful that most of the people who voted for Harry Truman agreed with him on all the things he stood for. But they knew he stood for something, and they agreed with enough of it to put him back in the White House.

It is equally doubtful that most of the people who voted for Ronald Reagan in his two landslide victories agreed with all his positions. But they agreed with enough of them to put him in the White House to replace Jimmy Carter, who stood in the center, even if it was only a center of confusion.

President Gerald Ford, after narrowly beating off a rare challenge by Ronald Reagan to a sitting president of his own party, seized the center in the general election — and lost to an initially almost totally unknown governor from Georgia.

President George H.W. Bush, after initially winning election by coming across as another Ronald Reagan, with his “Read my lips, no new taxes” speech, turned “kinder and gentler” — to everyone except the taxpayers — once he was in office. In other ways as well, he seized the center. And lost to another unknown governor.

More recently, we have seen two more Republican candidates who seized the center — Senators Bob Dole in 1996 and John McCain in 2008 — go down to defeat, McCain at the hands of a man that most people had never even heard of, just three years earlier.



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on November 30, 2011

Michael Medved, however, reads history differently.

To him, Barry Goldwater got clobbered in the 1964 elections because of his strong conservatism. But did his opponent, Lyndon Johnson, seize the center? Johnson was at least as far to the left as Goldwater was to the right. And Goldwater scared the daylights out of people with the way he expressed himself, especially on foreign policy, where he came across as reckless.

On a personal note, I wrote a two-line verse that year, titled "The Goldwater Administration":

Fifteen minutes of laissez-faire,
While the Russian missiles are in the air.

Senator Goldwater was not crazy enough to start a nuclear war. But the way he talked sometimes made it seem as if he were. Ronald Reagan would later be elected and re-elected taking positions essentially the same as those on which Barry Goldwater lost big time. Reagan was simply a lot better at articulating his beliefs.

Michael Medved uses the 2010 defeat of Tea Party candidates for the Senate, in three states where Democrats were vulnerable, as another argument against those who do not court the center. But these were candidates whose political ineptness was the problem, not conservatism.

Candidates should certainly reach out to a broad electorate. But the question is whether they reach out by promoting their own principles to others or by trying to be all things to all people.

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