



THE VIEW

Issue #43

January 20, 2008

LIVING PROOF THAT YOUR VOTE COUNTS

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Once more we have incontrovertible proof that Mississippi has become a member in good standing of the world of two party politics. We are about as evenly divided as we can possibly be between Republicans and Democrats. Furthermore, protestations to the contrary, both sides are playing for keeps.

The recent contest for Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives is certainly a case in point. A brief recap of the events of that day would perhaps be instructive. Following procedures outlined in the Mississippi Constitution, Secretary of State Eric Clark conducted an election for the position of Temporary Speaker, whose sole role is to conduct the election for permanent House Speaker. The forces on the side of incumbent Speaker Billy McCoy nominated Representative Ed Blackmon for the Temporary post, while challenger Jeff Smith's supporters nominated Representative Robert Johnson. Thus, these nominations and this election would establish a litmus test for the actual vote to follow. The first tedious roll call took place and the entire population of the Mississippi Capitol sucked in its collective breath when Secretary Clark announced a 61 to 61 tie. Once again the roll call took place and the result was the same. On the third roll call Delta area Democrat Linda Coleman moved from the Smith column to the McCoy side and the stalemate was broken. On the subsequent vote for Speaker of the House the vote held at the same 62 to 60 margin. Of the three big blocks in the House, all 47 Republicans cast their vote for challenger Jeff Smith. All but two members of the 37-member Black Caucus voted with Speaker Billy McCoy. The remaining 11 votes for Democrat Smith came from members of the Democratic Party



who often find themselves ideologically aligned with their Republican counterparts.

While this is what transpired on the day the Speaker of the House was elected, the seeds for this almost standoff were actually planted on Election Day and in the campaign before it. In fact it is not a stretch to say that all of us voters were involved to some extent. The two most readily obvious cases involved House Districts 71 and 111. Many will remember that District 71 involved the seat occupied by long time incumbent Republican John Reeves. He was challenged by Democrat Adrienne Wooten, and a tight political battle ensued in this West Jackson/Hinds County district. The results were close enough without the controversy over ballot issues due to split precincts that resulted in a revote several days after the election in four precincts. District 111, which is largely in the city of Pascagoula, was assumed by many to be a clear lean for the Republicans. Democrat Brandon Jones, however, waged a highly effective campaign in a mild upset of Republican Tim Lee. The results of this race were in doubt until all of the absentee and affidavit ballots were counted and still it was almost a tie. The bottom line is that had either of these races, both decided by fewer voters than there are seats on a typical yellow school bus, gone the other way legislative life as we know it would have been markedly different. A few voters who had better things to do that day could have widened the margin for the winners or made winners out of losers.

These two instances and perhaps others almost like them didn't just happen. They were set up by the fierce behind the scenes campaign battle between the oft-mentioned well-oiled, well-financed Haley Barbour lead turnout machine and the determined effort to counter that Republican juggernaut by the Democratically conceived VPAC. While Governor Barbour had upwards of \$13 million at his disposal for the Republican election effort VPAC had decidedly less to aid Democratic House campaigns, but the accuracy in targeting those dollars cannot be denied. The members of the Mississippi House returned to town for the 2008 session with the same 28 vote Democratic Party margin that they had when they left town at the conclusion of the previous four-year term. Had the VPAC financed House Democratic campaign effort not been devised, the close votes in Districts 71 and 111 would have hardly been noticed or relevant. If the highly effective Republican turnout program had generated 30 or 40 more votes, the Democrats' best efforts would simply have been remembered as having fallen short.



As the formal processes of governance commence we know that the margins are razor thin for both sides. Even the most benign of issues must be analyzed by leaders on those respective sides as to whether voting a certain way will cede too much political territory to the other. This is two-party politics. Why do they fight so fiercely? With so little margin for error in thinking or in reading the motives of the other side, every vote by every citizen and, by extension, by every legislator seems to be bigger now than ever before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's e-mail is marty@sig.msstate.edu

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi State
UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.