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POLICY VS POLITICS: THE DIFFERENCES ARE OFTEN BIG

BY

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What happens when good policy and good politics collide? That seems to be the question in play as one considers the past few weeks' debates over important issues at the state and national levels.

A fairly new book entitled *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* by Drew Westin, a political psychologist on the faculty of Emory University, examines the paradox associated with the majority of the population that identifies with Democratic Party positions and the continued ability of the Republicans to win elections in spite of numbers that would suggest otherwise. The crux of his research examines the penchant for the Democrats to embrace positions based on well-crunched numbers that point toward obvious rational decisions based on the data as opposed to the Republican ability to understand the range of emotions that cause someone to vote a certain way regardless of the facts. This in no way implies that Republicans are being dishonest. Rather, Westin does an excellent job of demonstrating the difference in data-driven policy "wonks," who are often Democrats, and those who vote based on their "gut" feeling, which is the approach the Republicans have mastered in recent elections. In the contest between passion and policy, passion often wins, according to Westin.

To further consider this interesting comparison, it may be helpful to look at some recent events - in a bi-partisan fashion of course. On the national level, we only have to look to the debate over the energy bill that was before Congress as they were set to adjourn for their five week summer recess. With

the whole country sensitized to the potential crisis by the continuous and daily record breaking "pain at the pump," Congress was poised to take decisive action - or not. The Democrats held fast to their "no offshore drilling and no drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge" position, while the Republicans embraced the everyday consumer's pain by demanding to drill for oil and drill now. Amidst these cries of pain and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's refusal to bring a bill up for a vote the majority, Democrats closed up shop and headed for home. Barack Obama, the presumptive Presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, repeatedly tried to explain the party's position by citing voluminous data indicating the minimal effect that expanded drilling would have on oil, and hence gasoline prices. His well-documented argument held that this would only postpone the consideration of other energy alternatives that would have a greater long term impact. The Republicans, who are somewhat desperate for an issue to give them traction, leapt to the podium, remained in the capital long after adjournment and accused the Democrats of leaving town and stranding hard-hit Americans at the pump. Mississippi State University Alumnae and Tennessee Republican Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn, clutching the new energy-saving florescent light bulb was effusive in her disdain for the Democratic abandonment of our fellow citizens in their time of need. Will this issue be what turns the tide for the Republicans?

The State of Mississippi has not been spared similar drama. In this state it comes in the form of the ongoing Medicare/Medicaid debacle. With a system that provides health care services to some 600,000 Mississippians and almost constantly in need of new resources, the debate is equally as prevalent as to where the financial resources are coming from. A majority of the Mississippi House of Representatives continues to favor an increase in the tax on tobacco as a source of revenue to fill the current \$90 million gap in Medicare/Medicaid funding. Governor Haley Barbour on the other hand remains adamantly opposed to any increase in the tobacco tax at this time. Instead, he and his policy people have devised an intricately detailed plan based on the assessment of hospitals on a per-bed basis to make up the needed revenue. The political high ground clearly belongs to those in favor of taxing ole devil tobacco, and when they combine this sentiment with the one that accuses the other side of being willing to tax bedridden sick people even at the expense of protecting the big tobacco companies, it becomes clear where the passion of the voters lies. Once again, the Governor's approach is a rational one based on no small amount of data, but the political passion is clearly stacked against him.

Even at the local level these same types of issues arise and at times become more heated than at the federal and state levels. Consider, for example, the



issue of school consolidation. Countless studies make a case that combining school districts in a county will result in more efficient use of resources which in turn will bring about a broader curriculum and more opportunities for the young people in the county. Never mind the loss to communities of the school that has been their hearts for decades, or that just last year won the state basketball championship. Is it possible in a situation such as this to explain that good policy should trump local political sentiment?

Just as Drew Westin found in his research, rational policy and political passion are often aligned. But when they are opposed political passion usually wins.

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