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The Bullwether Effect

By Mike Tully

I call it the “bullwether” effect. Specifically, is it bull whether an off-year election result dictates the outcome of national elections a year later? We’ve been inundated with the term “bellwether” a lot, thanks to a couple of off-year elections. The term [originally referred to](#) the lead sheep of a domesticated pack, the one that wears a bell. It’s composed of the words “bell,” which is self-explanatory, and “wether,” meaning a male sheep that has been castrated.

The major networks and cable news organizations have been tossing around the term “bellwether” a lot recently, in wake of the election results in Virginia and New Jersey. You can’t escape it. For example, Spectrum 1 News in Syracuse [refers to a pair of New York counties](#) as “suburban bellwethers.” The Center for American Progress interviewed a Democratic strategist [who discussed the “bellwether elections”](#) in Virginia and New Jersey. A Pennsylvania television station [asked if those elections](#) were a “bellwether” for national elections in 2022. *The New York Times* [said the Virginia’s governor race](#) was “widely viewed as a bellwether” for next year’s midterms. Even [The Times of India referred to](#) the “bellwether Virginia’s governor race.”

Bullwether! They’re trying to pull the wool over our eyes.

Think about it. When talking heads tell us an election will have a “bellwether” effect, they’re predicting that voters will act like a herd of sheep blindly following a castrated leader with a noisemaker. (Come to think of it, that sounds a lot like Trump followers.)

While some election outcomes historically forecast subsequent election results, it’s illogical to automatically assume some kind of talismanic significance. That’s not analysis; it’s magical thinking. The fact that a Republican was elected in Virginia does not automatically mean that his party will sweep the House and Senate next year. Nor does the fact that the first mid-term following a presidential election almost always benefits the opposition mean that the President’s party will get shellacked every time. It happens that way until it doesn’t.

Maybe I’m being a black sheep, but I think it’s important to abandon the fatalism that comes with slavish devotion to past election results. That can lead to complacency or panic, neither of which serves a political campaign. I don’t propose ignoring the results entirely. It’s certainly important to mine the electorate to figure out why voters cast ballots the way they do. That’s common sense. But it can be done without magical thinking.

Most of the commentators who bleat about the “bellwether” effect also declare that we are living through a unique time in history. They’ll use the words “bellwether” and “unprecedented” in the same paragraph without regard for the mid-brain collision they cause. That’s not analysis; it’s incoherence. If we live in unprecedented times, what good are bellwethers?

Too much is new.

Facebook impacts election results but has only been around since 2004. Donald Trump became relevant politically when he embraced birtherism, a movement that began in 2008. The American public has only recently begun to realize the dangers of global climate change and the need to address it with public policy. Voters finally realize that economic policies spawned by Republican administrations unleashed a concentration of wealth among the richest that is destabilizing. Facebook, Trump, climate change and economic disparity are the Four Horses of the modern political apocalypse – and they’ve been issues for less than a generation.

Those who tame and ride those horses will inherit the future. Virginia and New Jersey notwithstanding, the donkey has a much better chance of riding them than the elephant. Democrats need to lead the charge against Facebook: limit its legal immunity, split off Instagram and What’s App, and ban algorithms (with a possible exception for marketing, the only arguably good reason for them). Democrats need to laser-focus on economic inequality and point out that it’s not the result of liberal professors, entitled movie stars, or coastal elites. Place the blame where it belongs: with Republican economic policies beginning with Reagan and continuing through Trump. On climate change, Democrats can label the GOP as a “pro-disaster” party.

Then there is the last horse: Trump and Trumpism. Remember [that scene in *Ghostbusters*](#) when Peter Venkman (Bill Murray) said, "I'm fuzzy on the whole good/bad thing. What do you mean, 'bad'"? Egon Spengler (Harold Ramis) replied, “Try to imagine all life as you know it stopping instantaneously and every molecule in your body exploding at the speed of light.” American political discourse is infected with “both-sides-ism.” It makes us fuzzy on the whole good/bad thing. We need less Venkman and more Spengler. Trumpism will stop life as we know it and democracy will explode at the speed of light. It’s no time for understatement.

This is a time for demonizing, denouncing and demagoguing, while singing our fight song:

Wooly-bully
Wooly-bully
Wooly-bully