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Alabama Voices: Reality, not theory, November 14, 2010 By Larry Dixon

I always enjoyed my political science classes in graduate school. Political theory, like economic theory, just seems so logical, but reality and theory don't always mesh. After 32 years in the Alabama Legislature, I believe political science theories alone might not correctly tell why the Republican candidates unexpectedly swept election after election in some of the most Democratic strongholds in Alabama. You can't explain away Shadrack McGill, R-Scottsboro, defeating the most powerful senator in Alabama, Lowell Barron, with poli-sci theory. You don't explain away with a political science theory the majority leaders in the House and Senate being steamrolled by their Republican opponents, neither of whom had ever run for public office.

You don't explain away long-term, popular -- at least at one time -- incumbent senators being defeated in election after election by talking about national economics or their failure to energize their base. You can't mention how these were considered to be "conservative" Democrats, and then look for another theory to explain what happened. Maybe those exit interviews should have asked "What energized you to vote against the incumbent?" I can imagine some of the responses might not have been printable.

Here is a new political theory: You can only fool the electorate so many times. When you begin every new legislative term with news conferences about all the legislation that will be introduced and passed to ban PAC-to-PAC transfers and then have another news conference when the bill is introduced on the first day of the session, only to have it totally disappear for the rest of the year, people start to notice.

In addition, when you also pledge to reform the ethics law to include subpoena power and stronger lobbying restrictions and a reduction in the amount of money which can be spent on officeholders and public employees and you then have another press conference to laud ourselves for actually introducing the bill, only to see it disappear for the rest of the session, as did the PAC-to-PAC transfer ban bill, people start to notice.

Guess what? Those things start to sink in and even people who have voted for you in the past start to wonder just how stupid you think they are. If you show someone time and time again that you think they are stupid and still believe in blue smoke and mirrors, they start to get energized. Not only are they energized, they are starting to watch what is going on as well. Before long they realize the party in power, the party in the majority, the party which actually controls every aspect of the Legislature -- the Senate in particular -- could be the only answer to the question, "Why aren't these new laws being passed?" Do you want to energize these working, tax-paying, family-raising, community-supporting citizens? Let them come to the realization that for some elected officials their constituents are not their first concern. Let people realize the powerful lobbyists, the powerful special interests, and the next election are what their senator is interested in.

If you want to see voters energized, it follows an understanding of the pecking order I just described and an incumbent's attitude of "Oh, by the way, I'll tune into you at the next election." There are some incumbents who lost election night which actually surprised me. I thought, except for what I'm about to describe, they were fairly good senators. When the Democrats stripped the lieutenant governor's power from the first Republican lieutenant governor since Reconstruction and began controlling everything in the Alabama Senate, they developed a rigid, super-majority set of operating rules.

These rules were designed to do two main things: to shut out the Republican minority from any decision making or ability to move legislation without the majority's consent, and to control and keep their own members in line. They set up a power structure which gave complete control of the process to five very powerful Democratic senators. A political scientist would think the president pro tem would be the most powerful, when in fact, that office became just a tool to keep the factions together. The real power was the budget chairs and "El Supremo" was the Rules Committee chairman. This was the senator who controlled the flow of legislation. This was the senator who got them all defeated.

Day after day, the other senators sat there without saying a word as the rules chairman brought special order calendars (daily agendas), which only satisfied the powerful special interests which really only satisfied the most special of special interests. They dutifully voted to adopt these agendas day after day and never asked where the bills the public was interested in were and when they were going to come to the floor to be voted on. This went on for 12 years. This went on for three four-year terms.

I can't tell you why supposedly strong, politically astute men and women sat there and blindly followed their leaders down this path with never a word of dissent, but they did. They were "fellow travelers" through 12 years of broken promises, 12 years of taking their constituents for granted and ultimately, for some of them, total arrogance toward the citizenry.

To all those highly educated political scientists talking theoretically about the Alabama elections and the political demise of the "old guard Democrats" I would like to present this treatise on how to energize the electorate as an observed fact, not just a theory.

Larry Dixon, R-Montgomery, represented District 25 in the Alabama Senate. He did not seek re-election this year.