

True Believers Make Me Nervous

☒ True believers make me nervous, and not just the lefty true believers with whom I have virtually nothing in common. Conservative true believers make me uneasy too. They're too rigid for my taste. They won't budge from their rock-solid principles, no matter what. They are purists who would rather lose an election than compromise, a word they spit out with contempt.

Call me crazy, but I'd rather win. And while being pure is just great, if say, you're a monk, it's not so wonderful in the real world of politics.

During the 1964 presidential campaign, Barry Goldwater, the leading conservative politician and true believer of his day, spelled out the philosophy when he said, "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!" That may be so, but Goldwater carried just six states, and in terms of the popular vote he lost in the fifth most lopsided presidential election in U.S. history.

At least he didn't compromise on his principles, right?

And now we have Christine O'Donnell, the winner in the Delaware Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. No, she's no Barry Goldwater, in terms of stature. But she did manage to do something Goldwater wasn't able to do: she pulled off a major upset. O'Donnell beat a moderate Republican, Mike Castle, who by every count would have been a shoe-in come November. Now, the odds are long against O'Donnell.

It's no secret that winning a primary, which normally attracts the most ardent voters on both extremes, is not the same thing as winning a general election. Castle is a RINO, a Republican

in Name Only – not Rush Limbaugh’s kind of Republican, and not mine either. But Delaware isn’t Idaho or Alabama. The conventional wisdom says a staunch conservative like O’Donnell, who was supported by the Tea Party, can’t win a general election in Delaware.

But the purists says it’s way too early to be writing Ms. O’Donnell’s obituary. And truth be told, even if she doesn’t win, the purists would still rather have her running than a RINO. A win with the likes of Mike Castle is no win at all as they see it. A loss, if it comes to that, with O’Donnell would be a principled defeat.

I get it but I don’t buy it. Let’s say Castle votes with Republicans only half the time. Isn’t that better than having a Democrat from Delaware in the Senate, who will vote with the Republicans none of the time? Isn’t it better to have two (barely) Republicans like Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe in the Senate from Maine – than two Democrats? If Republicans want to truly be a national party, they will need not only conservative candidates who can win in solidly Red States, but moderates (another word the purists spit out with contempt) who can win in states that often vote Blue.

Jim DeMint, the conservative Republican senator from South Carolina – who backed O’Donnell – once said that, **“I would rather have 30 Republicans in the Senate who really believe in principles of limited government, free markets, free people, than to have 60 that don’t have a set of beliefs.”** Me too, Jim, but in the real world, the Democrats would shove whatever left-wing programs they want down those 30 conservative throats – and there wouldn’t be a damn thing DeMint and his 29 conservative pals could do about it.

I prefer a more realistic conservative’s take. I want the most viable conservative to win, Bill Buckley used to say. Viable, as in *electable*.

Conventional wisdom says O'Donnell doesn't stand a chance. But this may be the year conventional wisdom takes it on the chin. This may be the year when there are enough disaffected independents, and even Democrats – enough folks out of work or worried about keeping their jobs and their homes – to elect a supposedly unelectable right-winger. Despite the odds, it could happen. If it does, the true believers will look mighty good. And that would be just fine with me.