

A drive through western Wisconsin, across state and county highways, is an object lesson in political activism on a piecemeal basis. The Democrats had best take action, lest they fall into the "Dustbin of history" (as Karl Marx once put it).

The roadsides are littered with signs for hotly contested races " from County Commissioner and District Attorney (small yard sign size) to State Assembly and State Senate to Congress, U.S. Senate and, of course, President (4' x 6' or larger).

While we in the city may be used to seeing the typical yard sign, maybe 12 x 18 inches or a bit larger, in the countryside most are large.

A trip this Labor Day weekend showed me just how active people are this year, and a couple of things jumped out at me:

1. It is very common to see several signs grouped together at a prominent location " say a major intersection of county and state roads;

2. Those clusters are always for Republican party candidates.

The candidates I saw the most advertising for were almost all Republicans:

* St. Sen. Dale Schultz (R - 17th) from Reedsburg for U.S. Congress, challenging incumbent Ron Kind of La Crosse (D " 3rd). (Schultz's slogans include "Send another Rough Rider to Washington!" "I wear denim as often as I wear pinstripes!" and "My favorite color is blaze orange!" I wonder if we may have found the elusive seventh member of the Village People?!!)

* Dan Kapanke, (R-La Crosse) to replace the retiring Mark Meyer (D-La Crosse) in St. Senate District 32

* Lee A. Nerison, (R-Westby) and Judy L. Schmirler, (R-Westby) running for Rep. DuWayne Johnsrud's (R-Eastman) Assembly seat in District 96

* Brad Pfaff, (D-Onalaska) challenging Kapanke for Meyer's seat.

A common arrangement was to see Schultz, Kapanke and either Nerison or Schmirler, along with either Russ Darrow or Tim Michels, and George Bush, all together at a crossroads or atop a hill. Kapanke was everywhere, even without the others, and Schultz seemed omnipresent as well " often appearing solo in a farm field.

What else was remarkable? The absence of any, any, official signs for:

1. Sen. Russ Feingold (D) incumbent

2. Sen. John Kerry (D) Presidential challenger

3. Rep. Ron Kind (D - 3rd)

4. Gail A. Frie, (D-Viroqua), Betty Havlik (D-Wonewoc) or Miguel Morga (D-Gays Mills) running to replace Rep. DuWayne Johnsrud in the 96th Assembly District.

Also worthy of remark, a surprising number of home made, hand lettered signs for:

1. Sen. Russ Feingold

2. Sen. John Kerry

3. Frie, Havlik, Morga and Pfaff

In Trempealeau, a large, hand lettered sign (at least 3' x 5') read "Support Russ Feingold " He fights for working people"

In West Salem, on a street where a Bush sign might almost go unnoticed, a hand lettered sign read, simply, "John Kerry 2004."

At my wife's aunt's birthday party in West Salem a neighbor, Tom, approaches me in the kitchen and says, "Nic, you're political, aren't you?"

I'm not quite sure how to respond. My wife's relatives up in West Salem are lifelong Republicans and I just assume that the neighbors are as well. I know Tom to be wealthy, and, at 50 something, already retired. He is also a Harley rider, so it might fairly be assumed that he has a Libertarian streak as well.

I demure, saying "Yeah, somewhat..." and leave that hang in the air to see where he's heading.

[Yes, by the way, I am "political" as Tom put it. I have been since I was nine years old

and worked on the McGovern campaign. Most recently, aside from my monetary contributions, I went to the Iowa caucuses as part of Howard Dean's "Perfect Storm" and hosted other Dean supporters for our own Wisconsin primaries. I do not know how much of this Tom knows, but I am guessing that he is asking because I have long hair. Some people are that transparent, but Tom really isn't.]

Tom goes on, "I'm not. I haven't really ever been, but it's important this time. We have to act." I still cannot tell where he stands, and whether I want to have this conversation. "I can't stomach Bush, and I'm worried," he says.

Whew, what a relief!

"No, I can't either," I say.

"I guess I could be pegged as a Republican," Tom goes on, "but I'm just not that political."

"I have been all my life," I say.

"Republican?" Tom asks, before I can finish my sentence.

"No, political," I respond.

We continue to talk for about fifteen minutes, all the while dodging other people reaching for lemonaid, napkins and deviled eggs. Tom talks freely to me, almost as though he is seeking validation of his beliefs.

"I did very well with Bush," he says, "I saved at least \$25,000 maybe \$30,000 with his tax cuts. But, I don't need that. It isn't all about money, there are larger issues."

"Taxes are the price we pay for a civilized society," I misquote Oliver Wendell Holmes. "We took our 'rebate' and sent it off to charity: Hunger Task Force, Oxfam, Red Cross ... and the Democratic Party!" I report.

"I did what they thought I would do," Tom replies, "I invested it, but that just helps me more. I'm sure it created some work, some jobs, but not enough to balance out what the cuts have cost us. I just can't believe that this program is working, is helping this society." I feel as though I have been dropped into one of Errol Morris's MoveOn.org PAC commercials; you know, where people who voted for Bush in 2000 repent and pledge to vote for Kerry this time. I am not making this up. Tom, the 50 something Harley riding early retiree living in West Salem surrounded by Bush supporters is not just ready to tell me all of this, he is doing so in the neighbor's kitchen while friends and neighbors swarm around us, and hear and listen to all that we are saying. More than a few stop to pay closer attention as the two of us settle into a proper conversation.

I speak of my concern that the recent (since 1980) focus by the GOP on culture issues was causing more and more people to vote single issue (abortion) or simple issue ("God, guns and gays!") and against their own best interest in other ways (economic, national security, agricultural and trade issues, etc.). I reiterate the basic precepts of Thomas Frank's book What's the matter with Kansas. Tom listens and seemed to agree on these points.

I am feeling a little heady with this, while still scanning out of the corner of my eye to see what the assembled were thinking.

Tom, though, seems focused on one thing. "I have only voted for President twice in my life," he tells me, "once for Reagan and once for Clinton." (I'm tempted to ask for which terms, but don't. What he says next makes me glad I held off). "This is an important election, this time it matters, and I cannot support Bush, I have to support Edwards."

This is the fifth time he says Edwards instead of Kerry, and I finally correct him. I am beginning to wonder whom he is really supporting, but realize that I don't care. Neither does he "he knows what he means, and what he means is that the country is headed in a dangerous direction and we need change."

"This is important, and I have to do what I can," he says. "I am part of that quiet group " we don't make noise and people may not know we're here, but we are and we care

and we cannot let this go on.â€

So this is the message. The Republicans are advertising heavily in western Wisconsin, they are on every county and state highway. This may seem trivial to you and me, here in the city, but out there the impact is huge: People drive past these signs every day, on their way to work, school, the fields, wherever. The Democrats are nowhere. Nowhere. No one drives past their signs. Not unless, that is, they drive past one of the hand lettered signs that some dedicated person has put up in their front yard or farm field.

Where is the Democratic Party?

* It is not raising money for these people: With the possible exception of Brad Pfaff, no progressive running in a state or local race out west has any significant support.

* It is not distributing campaign material: there are no signs, bumper stickers, anything. Pay attention â€” people are making their own signs, not for the artistic expression, but because they have NO CHOICE!

I think half the reason Tom talked to me as he did was to make sure he isn't supporting charlatans, he has that little to go on.

What it comes down to is that the state Democratic party seems to be giving up on the hinterlands, and it cannot afford to do so. Al Gore won Wisconsin by less than six thousand votes in 2000, but he won La Crosse County. If John Kerry cannot win La Crosse County this year, then he will not win Wisconsin, and he will probably not win the Presidency. If he is to have a ghost of a chance of winning, he will need the help of down-ticket races. John Kerry needs Brad Pfaff. John Kerry needs Ron Kind. He needs Russ Feingold and he needs John Edwards.

That last point is important. In order to win Wisconsin â€” to win enough of Wisconsin to matter, not just Milwaukee and Madison â€” John Kerry needs to send John Edwards to every little nook and cranny of the state to ferret out those votes who will lean towards Bush unless someone can come along and remind them that Bush doesn't really represent them. No one can do that as well as John Edwards.

If you are thinking about lending your support to progressive causes this year â€” to support the Democratic party or John Kerry or Russ Feingold, to help the winner of the Democratic primary for the 4th Congressional district (Gwen Moore, Matt Flynn or Tim Carpenter), or Jennifer Morales, (D-Milwaukee) in her seemingly quixotic race against Alberta Darling â€” also think about sending some money or other support out west away.

Think about calling or writing your favorite progressive organizations and reminding them that they shouldn't give up on the out-state, down-ticket races.

Every vote â€” whether it was a losing assembly candidate or a winning US Senate race that brought it out â€” will count the same when it comes to winning or losing the Presidency this November.