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# THE VIEW

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## THE VIEW FROM THE STENNIS INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT

BY

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Remember the days when political campaigning offered numerous opportunities for socializing? Remember those political speaking events where you could gorge yourself on fried chicken, homemade ice cream and watermelon?

All of this was consumed from a lawn chair while many an amateur candidate made speeches designed to convince you that he or she held your exact opinion on virtually every issue. The food was there to draw the biggest crowd possible. It was the political equivalent of hunting over a baited field. Those days are likely gone forever.

Speculation is already beginning in earnest about the potential for the Democrats to take one or both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections or for the Republicans to lose the same. Usually, this is the year when the political party in power is sent a sobering message by the voters, often resulting in the loss of Senate and House seats. But that outcome may be more difficult than in the past, the reasons for which are only indirectly tied to the heat of political opinion. Everything about the political milieu, from setting of districts through the pursuit of votes to the making of public policy, has succumbed to the efficient world of electronic technology.

The introduction of computer technology for the identification and quantification of demographic characteristics and use of that information to create voting districts has changed political life as we know it. This turn of events has lessened the importance of the voter who is a mere amateur and elevated the importance of the demographer/political analyst.

In the old days, the strategy to identify demographic characteristics began and ended with race, particularly in the southern states often referred to as the Voting Rights Act States. While this continues to be the only concern of the United States Justice Department when it evaluates electoral districts, the technology associated with redistricting under these guidelines has been extended far beyond its original use.

One need only glance at the classifications compiled by a company like Claritas Demographics to get a feel for the precision associated with this new targeting of political messages. Such classifications as “New Homesteaders,” “Young Middle Class Families,” “Red, White, and Blues” and “Small Town Blue-Collar Families” can all be factored into the redistricting process and then be used for the precise targeting of political messaging.

A fundamental function of a political party in the majority is to place its incumbents in the most favorable position possible to get reelected. Basic to this function is the process of redistricting that takes place after the census every ten years. We now have the ability to create virtually certain Republican districts as well as Democratic safe districts. I remind you of the gambit by the powerful, now former Texas Congressman Tom DeLay to change the makeup of the Texas Congressional Delegation by forcing the majority Republican Texas Legislature to revisit its 2000 redistricting plan. He was successful in changing five Democratic districts to Republican districts.

The advent of census block data (small units containing population and demographic information) and computer programs to easily manipulate that data has made it possible for experts to identify districts that are highly likely to vote for one party or the other, and this goes far beyond race. In the past, the process of using pencils, calculators, and butcher paper made such fine tuning of voter districts virtually impossible. Now we are able to bring together the tools of market analysis, politics and mapping to comprise a district whose voting behavior can be predicted with a great deal of accuracy.

Now this combination of census data and mapping ability can certainly result in some strangely shaped districts. It hasn't been long since we learned in social studies that a maneuver referred to as “Gerrymandering” was considered to be dirty pool in the process of comprising new electoral districts. Back in the early 1800's Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry prodded his political cronies into drawing up districts that one pundit said were shaped like salamanders. Hence the process became known as “Gerrymandering”. Elbridge Gerry

would be proud to know that his contribution to electoral politics has apparently gained full acceptance by both parties.

The use of this technology is the new route to success, but the expertise to maximize its use is not free or cheap. Consequently, that is where all of the money is going.

So forget about filling your bag with matchbooks and nail files bearing a candidate's name. And sadly, if you decide to have a political speaking with dinner on the ground I'll still come. But don't fry up all your chickens because there won't be many of us there. Most of us will be in front of the television absorbing the latest sound bite.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

### **WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D**

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:**

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.



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