

HAS THE *MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL* BECOME IRRELEVANT?

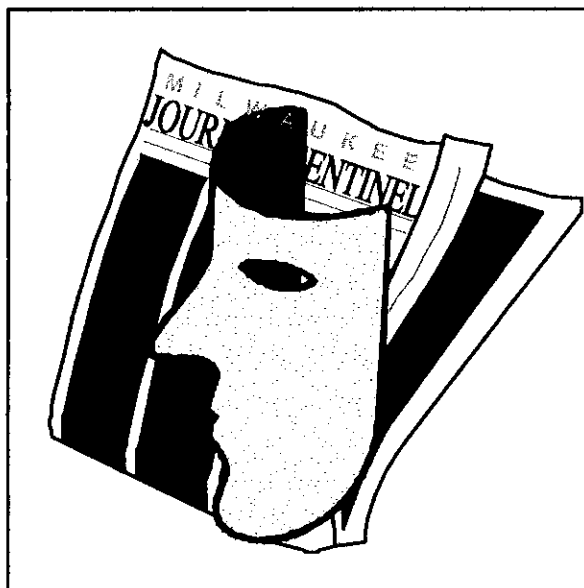
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The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has a long history of both informing and influencing the people of Milwaukee and Wisconsin. It is, without a doubt, Wisconsin's largest and most influential newspaper. But does it have the same influence it had in the past? Does it continue to dominate public policy debates or has its influence diminished in step with its declines in circulation? Has the editorial

board staff remained true to its independent roots, or is deference given to one political party over the other? In order to shed light on these considerable issues, the paper's political endorsement records are examined, including a close look at the Milwaukee County recall elections of 2002.

Data and Method

Political endorsements made by the eleven-member *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial board staff were obtained from 1998 to the present.¹ General election endorsements are considered in the quantitative analysis. The races analyzed include all state-wide races, state and federal offices in which citizens of Milwaukee County participate, and local Milwaukee County elections.² The endorse-



ment success rate was determined by taking a look at the paper's candidate selection versus the actual election results. Vote totals and election winners for the Milwaukee County races were determined from the "blue book" of election results for each year compiled by the Milwaukee County Board of Election Commissioners. All state and federal government races were analyzed using

election data available on the state of Wisconsin Elections Board web page.³ It should be noted that this study only analyzes the writing and endorsements of the editorial board and not the *Journal Sentinel* news staff. It is assumed that these are two distinct groups with the opinions and endorsements provided on the editorial page representing those of the eleven-member staff and not necessarily the newsroom, entire paper, or Journal Communications.

Politically Independent?

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial staff verbalizes their mission and policy through a document entitled, "Where we stand

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at the *Journal Sentinel*.⁴ The first tenet submitted in this document is centered upon their independence in the spirit of the *Journal* founder Lucius Nieman. The actual statement reads as follows: "We are independent, beholden to no special interest or political party. The roots of this pledge extend far back into Milwaukee's history." Subsequent parts of this document lend details and specifics to this proclamation. A sampling of the way the editorial board describes their philosophy include the following statements:

- We are conservative on fiscal issues. . .
- We believe in the American free enterprise system and minimal government interference. . .
- We believe that a just society must have compassion for the unfortunate. . .
- We believe diversity unites us all. . .
- We believe in a strong national defense

At initial glance, these statements afford credibility to the paper's stated primary mission of independence. Aspects of both conservative and liberal political philosophies are prevalent in these sentiments. They also appear to be in line with the typical moderate Milwaukee-area voter and newspaper subscriber. The paper professes to be conservative on fiscal issues, clearly a mantra of Republicans. They temper this with a declaration to fight for the less fortunate, a traditionally Democratic stance. The views on national defense and diversity also illustrate this dichotomy. With these assertions in mind, it would be expected that the paper's endorsements would reflect this independence and be split relatively evenly between the political parties.

The empirical evidence does not bear this out, however. In fact, from 1998 to the present, nearly 76% of the *Journal Sentinel* endorsements have gone to Democrats. In reality, this ratio is tilted further to the left considering that one of their Republican endorsements came in a race where no Democratic candidate ran,⁵ and the majority of other Republican endorsements were made in conservative districts in which the non-Republican had little or no chance of winning the seat. To further this point, one must consider that the average margin of victory for *Journal Sentinel* endorsed Republican candidates is nearly 33%⁶, and not one of these endorsed candidates lost their race. Table 1 shows the percentage of *Journal Sentinel* endorsements by political party and year. These data show that not only does this paper primarily endorse Democrats, but the percentage is progressively increasing. In 1998, 75% of the partisan races studied yielded Democratic endorsements. In 2000 and 2002 this percentage rose to 77%. This year, the few partisan races that have been conducted have all elicited Democratic endorsements. The statement that this paper's editorial board is independent and not beholden to a particular party appears to differ from the empirical evidence. The data suggests that the paper exerts their influence in favor of Democratic candidates at a greater than three-to-one ratio.

Fiscally Conservative?

Another section of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial policy states, "We are conservative on fiscal issues." They expound upon this facet of their code by stating, "We believe that the power to tax must be vigilantly checked. The government that governs best is frugal and levies taxes reluctantly." The actions of the board,

TABLE 1 MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL POLITICAL ENDORSEMENTS BY PARTY AFFILIATION⁷

| Year | % Democrat Endorse | % Republican Endorse |
|------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1998 | 75% | 25% |
| 2000 | 77% | 23% |
| 2002 | 77% | 23% |
| 2003 | 100% | 0% |

once again, suggest some deviation between the stated mission of the *Journal Sentinel* editorial page and their actual record.

The data presented in the previous section raises the first indication that fiscal conservatism may no longer be at the heart of the editorial staff's beliefs. While some Democrats are undoubtedly money-wise, and some Republicans free-spending, it seems that the endorsements would be more evenly divided between parties if fiscal conservatism was truly an overriding concern.

A reasonable place to continue the discussion of fiscal conservatism is via a study of spending referenda. Since 1998, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial board has taken a position on eight school district spending proposals that have shown up on general election ballots. Each of these referenda sought approval from voters to exceed state mandated revenue caps in K12 education for new construction, renovation or a litany of other purposes.⁸ Likely some of these requests were warranted, while others may have been excessive. It would be expected that the *Journal Sentinel* editorial board, with the resources to determine which fall into each category, would make appropriate advisements for their readers.⁹ In the end, however; this board chose to recommend every single spending measure, while voters struck down five of the eight spending referenda. Again, an obvious discrepancy appears between the assertions of the editorial board and the opinions of Milwaukee-area voters.

Endorsement Accuracy

Just how much weight does an endorsement by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial board carry today? To answer this question, we first turn to the results of partisan elections

since 1998. These results are used to measure the accuracy of the newspaper's endorsements. It should be noted that the role of the editorial board at the *Journal Sentinel*, or any other credible newspaper, is not to simply endorse the winner of elections. Newspaper editorial staffs are obviously not in the business of forecasting election results, but the real goal is to deliver opinions in an effort to influence and guide readers on their selection of future government leaders. The *Journal Sentinel* does this based on their core beliefs as documented in the aforementioned "Where we stand at the *Journal Sentinel*" manuscript. Quoting from this document, "In passing our opinions on to our read-

ers, we are carrying out a historic mission first assumed by the founders of the earliest newspapers in our original thirteen colonies, and today recognized as a primary function of a free press."

With this said, the primary purpose of conveying these endorsements is to influence elections and, therefore, public policy. To be truly relevant, the candidates endorsed by a major newspaper must have some degree of success.

Given that the *Journal Sentinel* is the only major newspaper in Milwaukee, and the largest paper in the largest city in Wisconsin, it would be expected that their endorsements would carry much potency. This hypothesis is proven to be correct in the partisan elections studied in this paper. Table 2 shows the percentage of partisan *Journal Sentinel* endorsements that actually won their elections for 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2003.¹⁰ Moreover, in 1998 and 2000 all of the candidates endorsed by the newspaper in partisan elections won their races. This percentage dipped to 92% in 2002, and plummeted further to 50% for the few partisan elections held in 2003. While the winning percentage of candidates endorsed by the

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paper has decreased over time, it continues to be imposing. To truly understand the impact of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in local politics, one must explore its influence in local non-partisan contests.

once non-partisan elections are introduced a very different picture is painted.

As a starting point for analyzing the influence the *Journal Sentinel* has had in non-partisan Milwaukee County races, we begin with a dissection of election results for 2000. Table 3 shows that in 2000 there were elections for Milwaukee County Executive and twelve Milwaukee County Board of Supervisor positions. In the County Executive race, the paper endorsed the now disgraced F. Thomas Ament, who won handily. Moreover, the candidates that the newspaper endorsed in eleven of the twelve supervisor races were also successful. The only loss being in the 13th district where Willie Johnson beat the *Journal Sentinel's* pick, Lennie Mosely.

TABLE 2 MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL PARTISAN POLITICAL ENDORSEMENTS WON BY YEAR

| Year | % of Partisan Endorsements Won |
|------|--------------------------------|
| 1998 | 100% |
| 2000 | 100% |
| 2002 | 92% |
| 2003 | 50% |

2002 – A Changing Political Environment

At first glance the percentage of candidates endorsed by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that won their respective races continued to be strong in 2002. While down from previous years, a 92 percent win ratio in partisan elections is impressive and suggests that the paper continued to wield great influence. However,

The proficiency of *Journal Sentinel* endorsements in the 2000 county ballots provides a fascinating foil to their dismal record in the 2002 races. The well-documented Milwaukee County pension scandal led to a flurry of election activity throughout the year. The first recall election was held in April of 2002 to replace the newspaper's advocated candidate

TABLE 3 2000 MILWAUKEE COUNTY ELECTIONS

| Office | Endorsed Candidate | Journal Sentinel Candidate Won? |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| County Executive | Ament | YES |
| County Board | White | YES |
| County Board | Davis, Sr. | YES |
| County Board | Podell | YES |
| County Board | Holloway | YES |
| County Board | Mayo | YES |
| County Board | Zielinski | YES |
| County Board | Mosley | NO |
| County Board | Launstein | YES |
| County Board | Weishan | YES |
| County Board | Arciszewski | YES |
| County Board | Ryan | YES |
| County Board | Lutzka | YES |

for Milwaukee County Executive from the 2000 election, F. Thomas Ament. In this election, the paper chose to endorse Jim Ryan, who was subsequently defeated by then Republican state assemblyman Scott Walker. As can be seen in Table 4, this was just the beginning of the paper's atrophy. Following the election for Milwaukee County

Executive, a whirlwind of County Board of Supervisor recall elections were held. The candidate endorsed by the newspaper turned out to be the loser in four of these five recalls. It is also interesting to note that the paper chose to endorse all three of the original supervisors responsible for the pension scandal that survived the primary and participated in the general election. The only race that the paper did get right, in the aftermath of the pension scandal fallout, was the endorsement of Paul Cersarz. Even in this race it would be a stretch to suggest that their nomination carried much influence, considering the opposition candidate, Kathleen Arciszewski, had been badly damaged by the pension scandal and lost by over 60 percent.

Milwaukee County recall elections was simply an anomaly, the special election held in April 2003 to replace Jeff Plale in the 21st state assembly district on the south side of Milwaukee is a good place to start. The evidence presented in an earlier section of this article documents that this race is typical of one in which the paper's endorsed candidate has almost always won in the past.

The race for the 21st assembly seat was waged between Democrat Al Foeckler and Republican Mark Honadel. The district had been under Democratic representation for the last seventy-five years and was considered a Democratic stronghold. The key issue in this election was a tax freeze plan, floated by state assembly Republicans, in which property taxes

would be locked in order to protect local taxpayers. Honadel voiced support for the plan while Foeckler opposed it.

Per their endorsement history, the *Journal Sentinel* chose to back

the Democrat in this race. Interestingly, the paper made no mention of the key issue in the contest — the property tax freeze — in their endorsement column. In a continuation of the trend that began in the 2002 Milwaukee County recall elections, the *Journal Sentinel's* candidate was trounced. In an election with a mere ten thousand votes cast, Honadel won with over 63 percent of the total vote. In the recent past, the endorsement of the paper in a local election such as this would have been the key to victory; of late, it appears to be more of an encumbrance.

Conclusion

There is evidence that the power base in Milwaukee may be shifting. Once a powerful player in local-area politics, the current

TABLE 4 2002 MILWAUKEE COUNTY ELECTIONS

| Office | Endorsed Candidate | Journal Sentinel Candidate Won? |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| County Executive | Ryan | NO |
| County Board | Ordinans | NO |
| County Board | Goff | NO |
| County Board | McGuigan | NO |
| County Board | Cesarz | YES |
| County Board | Ryan | NO |

Following the Milwaukee County recall elections of 2002, the year continued to be challenging for the *Journal Sentinel*. While eventually getting the race for Wisconsin governor correct, by endorsing Jim Doyle, the newspaper's preferred candidate, Tom Barrett, did not survive the Democratic primary. The results of the elections documented here call into question the amount of influence the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* retains in Milwaukee politics today. The limited evidence from 2003 may provide help in determining whether 2002 was an outlier, or the beginning of a long-term trend.

The Foeckler vs. Honadel Case Study

To decipher whether the *Journal Sentinel's* poor endorsement record in the 2002

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial board appears to have lost some influence. Beginning with the 2002 Milwaukee County recall elections and continuing into 2003, the newspaper's record of endorsements in local elections has become abysmal. Why has the paper fallen so far, so fast? While the newspaper circulation has swooned in recent years, with daily circulation falling almost eleven percent, and Sunday circulation down five percent since 1998,¹¹ this explanation seems a bit weak. Recent election data suggests that the *Journal Sentinel's* divergence from their stated mission, in particular their digression from the self-proclaimed ideals of independence and fiscal conservatism, is a more likely cause. It appears of late that readers have been less inclined to take the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* suggestions to the polls as they have in the past.

Notes

1. These endorsements were provided by a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial department staff member. These were corroborated using www.jsonline.com.
2. City of Milwaukee elections are not considered because of their non-partisan nature, small sample size and frequency with an unopposed candidate.
3. See: <http://elections.state.wi.us/>

4. See "Where we stand at the Journal Sentinel" at: www.jsonline.com/news/editorials/editpolicy.asp
5. Fall 2002 election for 14th district state assembly seat. Leah Vukmir, the Republican was endorsed. Her opponent was a Libertarian with no credibility. The *Journal Sentinel* actually endorsed a different candidate in the primary election.
6. Margin of victory is calculated by taking the winning candidates total vote percentage less the second place finishers total vote percentage.
7. There were no partisan elections, in the categories considered, in 1999 or 2001.
8. Approval of school district referenda obligates the State of Wisconsin to pay for two thirds of the building project cost.
9. In fact, the editorial board makes this point themselves in the "Where we stand at the Journal Sentinel" document when they write, "We recognize that editors and editorial writers are neither wiser nor more moral than other citizens. But editorial writers are in a better position than most people to dedicate time to digging out the facts and evaluating them before issuing judgements."
10. There were no partisan elections, in the categories considered, in 1999 or 2001.
11. Data obtained from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* marketing department. Daily circulation fell from 290,565 in 1998 to 257,599 in 2003. Sunday circulation fell from 456,354 in 1998 to 434,668 in 2003.