

## I sat out the Midterm Elections in Westchester. Why? Herd Journalism.

Steve Ditlea | Special to the USA TODAY Network | November 30, 2022

“You can observe a lot by just watching,” Yogi Berra is said to have said. Too bad political reporters haven’t learned that lesson, instead of repeating each other’s stale electoral story lines, about red tides versus blue walls, misleading potential voters into thinking their choices are forgone conclusions.

Case in point: The recent “major upset” in New York’s 17th U.S. Congressional District, including parts of Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties. That’s where local Republican Assemblyman Mike Lawler was expected to lose in a squeaker to five-term Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, according to the high-flying flock of election beat reporters. Turns out they were slinging Maloney’s baloney.



New York Assemblyman Mike Lawler greets supporters outside the Rockland County Courthouse Nov. 9, 2022. Lawler spoke to supporters and the media as he declared victory in his race for the U.S. Congress. Lawler defeated Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney in the race for the 17th congressional district.

Credit: Seth Harrison/The Journal News

On the Saturday morning before Election Day, any witness on the ground would have seen that the Maloney victory party was not to be. At a campaign rally beside a weekly farmers’ market at Patriot’s Park in Tarrytown, Democratic dysfunction couldn’t have been more obvious. While volunteers and paid consultants dutifully set up signs preparing for Maloney to make a get-out-the-vote appearance in safe Blue territory, apathy reigned.

Voters who wanted to engage on issues of importance to them were relegated to unprepared aides, while senior campaign staffers avoided the local constituents they were supposed to be wooing. As civilians walked away in disgust, the gathered apparatchiks were happy to talk among themselves instead of doing their jobs reaching out as the campaign was climaxing.

When underdog Lawler won this key race, bringing Republicans one seat closer to control of the U.S. House of Representatives, by a difference of 1% in the votes cast, the cause was as clear as this event failing due to organizational smugness. Of course, that never came up in post-mortem herd analyses, which attributed the results to suburban angst about crime and an impolitic attempt by Democrats to stack the deck in their favor when redistricting New York State.

Normal-Americans — a threatened minority yet to be recognized by the pollsters — don't care about "inside baseball" political coverage: who's in the lead, who's falling behind by how much, what effect weather will have on game conditions, it's as good as won, how did we get it so wrong, repeat. Like the great national pastime, political campaigning's slow play and overlong season undermines its appeal. "lohud analysis for subscribers:How Lawler beat Maloney: These factors led to Democrat's upset loss

We could waste less time on such by-the-numbers coverage by importing innovative voting regulation changes from abroad — like France's ban on polls the day before and the day of elections. You can already hear the herd grumble: "FREEDOM of the PRESS, hello," "thank GOD there's no easy way to change the Constitution of the United States", "don't TREAD On Me — or my BLUE suede shmooze!"

OK, it's not the fault of the staff journalists on the political beat who put a roof over their heads while their spouses work two jobs so they can afford to get the offspring into elite schools that feed into U.S. News and World Report's bogus-rated universities.

If anyone is to blame for the same old herd coverage, it's a nation addicted to the economic boost every fall from ridiculous spending to trade the same politicians in and out of office like Red and Blue crabs floating on the tide, reaching to claw more cash out of our pockets and give it to their accomplices and friends.

Call this the Media-Political Industrial Complex. Without presidential year, midterm, quarter-term and half-caf elections, imagine how much money would not be spent on mailings, signs, posters, fake straw hats, polls, pills, consultants, communicators, photographers, prognosticators, full-time staff writers and lots and lots of lawyers.

As broadcast and print lose their audiences to social media, blogs, tweets and texts, going-through-the-motions political coverage and resulting ads are sparing media enterprises plenty of red ink. That they get the story wrong and then explain it away for all the wrong reasons, just adds to revenue streams. It's not fake news, just lazy reporting.

How can we curb herd journalists' baloney next time? Try culling the herd. We don't need so many full-time political junkies embedded with politicians' staffs. Instead, rotate in food reporters who can describe the flavor of a campaign or obit writers to smell when something's dying. On-site. No journalist should get caught up in the ballyhoo and bunkum or whatever they call the candidates' messaging of the moment.

Above all, journalists should remember the motto created by 19th Century Chicago newspaper columnist Finley Peter Dunne for his alter ego Irish-American barkeep Mr. Dooley, which boils down to: "The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Amen, Mr. Dunne.

*Steve Ditlea lives in Elmsford and sat out the 2022 vote because of what happened at Patriot's Park on the Saturday before Election Day.*