

Lessons from November 3rd

**By Maria L. Fornella*

One year after a national election in which the Democrats won not only the presidency but 18 congressional seats and 9 new senators, the party lost two major gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey, but won an unexpected congressional seat in upstate New York. Clearly, Obama's coattails did not prove strong enough to bring out the two groups that helped him go over the top in last year's election, namely, the youth vote and the African American votes. There are many lessons to be learned by both parties from this past week's elections, but there is also the risk of over interpreting results as a prequel of next year's mid-term elections. First, in an "off-off" year, most of the electorate was indifferent to the elections, worried as they are about more pressing issues such as higher taxes, the ever-expanding deficit and more than anything else, about unemployment, which has just surpassed the 10% mark in spite of reported GDP growth of 3.5% this quarter. Second, the state gubernatorial races were played out at the local level and had more to do with the candidates themselves than with the voters' discontent with the President. Indeed, in a Virginia exit poll, 60% of the voters said that they had based their vote on state issues, while only 24% of those polled said they had used their vote to express their dissatisfaction with the President and 20% to express their support for him.

On the other hand, Congressional elections reflect more of the national mood, and here the Democrats were winners: due to an inner brawl among Republicans, they unexpectedly won a seat the Republicans had held since the 1870s in the twenty-third district of New York. still, just as it would be a mistake to give national significance to the state races, it would also be silly to miss the obvious: the preponderant mood in the country is anti-incumbency, and this affects both parties. But clearly, independents who voted for Obama are re-directing their votes toward the Republicans and becoming savvy, more issue specific voters. In addition, both parties have base problems: the Democrats need to figure out how to get their base to the polls during off-year elections, and the Republicans must find ways to control their base so that it does not destroy the party.

Turnout was the definitive factor in both gubernatorial races: it fell from 3.7 million to under 2 million in Virginia, and from almost 4 million to 2.3 million in New Jersey. The Republicans and Independents were more energized than the Democratic base, so they voted in larger numbers. Young voters between 18 and 29 years of age represented only 10% in Virginia and 9% in New Jersey. In contrast, in the 2008 presidential race they represented 21% and 17% respectively, and are credited for delivering the states to Obama in both cases. In New Jersey, an unpopular Democratic incumbent, albeit an Obama ally, lost to a new Republican face that ran on a fiscally conservative platform. Obama's appeal was apparently weaker than the voters' aversion for Jon Corzine, so U.S district attorney Chris Christie won, becoming the first Republican to win that

position in 12 years.

In Virginia, Bob McDonnell underplayed his extreme socially conservative views and his connection to Christian Right leader Pat Robertson. Instead, he ran a positive campaign based on job creation, quality of life for Virginians and fiscal responsibility. His opponent, Creigh Deeds, ran a negative TV ad campaign based on his opponent's social conservatism and his ideology as reflected in a misogynist twenty-year old thesis. In a calculation that backfired, Deeds distanced himself from President Obama for most of his campaign, only to turn to him towards the end. It proved to be too late. On that sunny autumnal day, Democratic voters, especially African Americans and young voters, the two groups that gave Obama his victory in Virginia, were absent from the polls.

After eight years of two outstanding Democratic governors, the Executive Mansion in Richmond reverted to Republicans. Unlike Governor Warner who in 2005 prepared the way for his successor, Tim Kaine had spent most of 2009 out of the state, in his new national role as chairman the Democratic National Committee, and did very little to help Deeds. Kaine's national ambition seems to have gotten in the way of his local role as Deeds' promoter and cheerleader, and he became, in the words of Professor Larry Sabato, more of a "partisan rather than a unifying figure" at home.

However, the apathy of Democratic voters has deeper roots than just civic irresponsibility or lack of engagement. It is also a reflection of disillusion and even rage with the failure of the Obama administration to create jobs and to deal with Wall Street in stricter terms, for example by breaking up the "too-big-to-fail" banks, introducing stricter regulation of derivatives trading and by reducing of CEO's compensation. Again, in spite of all the rhetoric, Obama seems to have bailed out Wall Street at the expense of middle-class tax payers and small businesses. In sum, Obama's young followers and liberals stayed home because Obama is moving too slowly in crucial issues; independents switched parties because of their own fears of losing their jobs and facing higher taxes, as well as to punish the Democrats for too much government spending with little results for higher employment; and McDonnell benefited as much from a weak, erratic opponent who ran a terrible campaign as he did from his own smart strategy and pragmatic style.

While the main problem then for Democrats is how to energize the base so that they can fulfill their civic duty and vote, the Republicans have the opposite problem: how to control their base so that it does not get in the way of allowing the party to field moderate candidates that can get the Independent vote. In this sense, what happened in New York 23rd district may be a blessing in disguise for the Republicans, as it will teach them a lesson in time for next year mid-term election. In this previously little known congressional district near the

Canadian border, the Republican Party nominated moderate Assemblywoman DeDe Scozzafava in a special election called to fill the seat of Representative JohnMcHugh (R-NY) who had been appointed Secretary of the Army by President Obama. This was regarded as a safe Republican seat given that the party had held it for over 100 years. However, in a twist of events that took both parties by surprise, Conservatives rebelled against the party nominee, whose social values were deemed too liberal, and fielded their own candidate, Doug Hoffman, with the support of talk show celebrities Rush Limbaugh, Glen

Beck and Sarah Palin. The Club for Growth, main supporter of Tea Partiers and Birthers, poured a lot of money in support of Hoffman, and consequently Scozzafava, the official Republican Party nominee, started training in the polls.

On the weekend before the election, Scozzafava abandoned the race and endorsed the Democratic candidate! The Right was jubilant, confident of a victory in this rural district, which has very few immigrants and is 93% white.

Indeed, Fox news insisted on predicting a “tidal wave” in favor of the Conservative candidate all throughout Election Day, only to be forced to concede at past midnight that instead, the Democratic candidate, Bill Owens, had won.

The election in the 23rd district, then, served as a warning to Republicans of what *not* to do in 2010. While the two Republicans that won the gubernatorial races did so by moving to center, thus appealing to Independents and moderates, the main losers in New York state were the Tea Partiers and Birthers who have taken advantage of the vacuum of leadership at the top, have hijacked the Republican Party and made the country at times seem ungovernable. Let it be noted here that both conservative candidates then- to- be governors elect, Chris Christie in New Jersey and Bob McDonnell in Virginia, had rejected Palin’s offer to campaign for them. Recognizing the relevance of this kind of wisdom, as well as his good looks and ability to persuade, McDonnell is already being touted as a possible candidate for the 2012 national ticket.

2009 will be remembered as the year of anti-incumbency, but this anti-incumbent mood is not so much about Obama, who still enjoys close to 60% of popularity, as it is about government in general. Indeed, every special Congressional election since Obama assumed the presidency has been won by Democrats even in seats previously held by Republicans. In politics, one year is an eternity, so it is difficult to extrapolate the November 3rd results to next year’s mid-term election. It all depends on whether the economic stimulus starts to work more consistently and is translated into jobs. The passage of health care reform by the House is undoubtedly a victory for Democrats, but it was a narrow one, with 39 Democrats voting against it, in spite of serious compromises by House Speaker Pelosi, including one amendment that prohibits the use of federal money for abortion and that is already under fire by the party’s liberals. If the so-called Stupak amendment is not taken out in House-Senate conference, then the Party may see a huge backlash by women and other groups. Still, health care reform will be a reality by year’s end, and once it passes it will become sacred: voters will embrace it (as they did with Medicaid and Medicare, as well as Social Security) and, together with job recovery, it may become the basis of a better mid-term election for Democrats than most pundits are predicting now.

Finally, while the two gubernatorial races were won by the Republicans, and can be read as a warning to incumbent governors everywhere in next year’s elections, it is clear that the largest group that went to the polls were mainly McCain voters, as well as disgruntled independent voters who shifted to the right. And while this trend is good news for the Republicans, the inexorable weight of demographics is against them: these races were won by an overwhelmingly white and older, more male than female, electorate who constitute at the same time an increasingly smaller percentage of the population as a whole. The fastest-rising voting groups do not vote for the Republican

Party, which they consider the party “without ideas”. To win next year, the GOP needs to regroup fast, get rid of the Palin-Limbaugh baggage and find new leadership. A year has gone by since their huge electoral loss and they have yet to find it.

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