

REPUBLICAN MAIN STREET PARTNERSHIP



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Special Election -- New York 23

Democrat Bill Owens won the special election to fill the seat of Republican Congressman John McHugh, who was appointed by President Obama to be Secretary of the Army. Owens defeated Conservative Party candidate Doug Hoffman, 49%-45%, with Republican nominee Dede Scozzafava receiving 6% after pulling out of the race the Saturday before the election.

News reports indicated that the results hinged more on local concerns and quirks of the race than broader political issues. The Wall Street Journal indicated that local voters objected to the characterization of the race as a referendum on national politics. Several people said they picked Mr. Owens, in part, because of an editorial in the Watertown Daily Times that criticized Mr. Hoffman for being unfamiliar with local issues during an interview at the paper.

Ron Faucheux, writing for Congressional Quarterly, noted that, "while GOP conservatives in New York 23 had good cause to be offended by the liberal leanings of the nominee their party leaders selected, they must consider an important truth: Political parties that refuse to expand their reach and isolate themselves within silos of ideological purity often find that they lose touch with reality and unnecessarily forfeit electoral majorities.

New Jersey and Virginia Governor

Republican candidates won in both New Jersey and Virginia, with Chris Christie receiving 49% to Jon Corzine's 46%, and Bob McDonnell winning 59%-41% over Creigh Deeds. While some believe this is the start of a trend towards a Republican resurgence in 2010, others assert the results were based largely on local factors.

Some Perspectives on the November Off-Year Elections

Columnist Michael Gerson, in an article entitled "Obama Cedes the Center," discussed the views of those on the extremes of both political parties. Gerson notes that some conservatives believe that if more candidates like Doug Hoffman (in New York 23) were nominated, the party might be pure enough to excite the base. And, he speculates that conservatives will mount more primary challenges to centrist Republicans. But, he continues, "This strategy is self-destructive when universalized." He concludes that, "Though the Republican Party will remain the conservative party nationally, it is not possible for Republicans

to win everywhere with an identical conservative message. The Republican candidates who won (on November 3) were generally conservative... but spent most of their time reaching toward the middle.”

E. J. Dionne, Jr., writing in The Washington Post, had a similar outlook. Part of his view of the November 3 election was his message to Republicans – “Talk a right-wing game in your ideological magazines and at your tea parties if that makes you happy. But to win elections, your candidates had better look like middle-of-the-road problem-solvers.”

Many political experts noted the large swing by independents from the Democrats to the Republicans in the 2009 elections. Ron Faucheux, writing in Congressional Quarterly, said, “In an era of polarized partisanship, where independents go is increasingly important. In Virginia, McDonnell won independents by a 2-to-1 margin: 66 percent to 33 percent for the Democratic candidate, state Sen. Creigh Deeds. In New Jersey, Republican Christie also won independents by a 2-to-1 margin: 60 percent to 30 percent for incumbent Gov. Jon Corzine. This was a big turnaround for Republicans from the presidential election. In 2008, Barack Obama beat John McCain among independents in both Virginia (49 percent-48 percent) and in New Jersey (51 percent-47 percent).”

An editorial in The Detroit News says that “Independents now make up the most powerful voting bloc, and they have a singular motivation: that the nation not be pulled too far in one direction or the other... President Obama and the Democratic majority in Congress used independent voters to gain control of Washington. Once they got it, they discarded the mandate to govern from the middle and pressed a left-wing agenda.... The GOP’s challenge is to accept that the void is in the middle, and rush there.”

Future Senate Election Contests

Congressional Quarterly recently took a look at the strategy of the head of the Senate Republican campaign committee, Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX). CQ notes that when Cornyn took over this year as the chief candidate recruiter and campaign fundraiser for the Senate GOP, he “didn’t tip his hand about his strategy for taking away as many seats as possible from the Democrats. But his choice was the same one the Republican Party has faced since losing Congress and the White House in the last two elections: push to strengthen the party’s ideological purity in hope of shoring up its base or relax its conservative orthodoxy in a bid to expand that base.”

“Now, a year before the midterm election — and with the fight for the ‘soul’ of the GOP roiling the party’s national leaders — the Texas senator has come down firmly on the ‘big tent’ side of the debate.” Senator Cornyn seems to have the goal of finding and promoting centrists able to win Senate seats in swing states and even some Democratic areas. And he’s decided to do so even though those candidates in at least four states — California, Florida, Kentucky and Connecticut — must first compete in and win expensive and potentially divisive primaries, mainly against more socially and fiscally conservative candidates.”

“Willie Sutton robbed banks because that’s where the money is,” said Fred N. Davis III, a political consultant based in Los Angeles, who last year advised both presidential nominee

John McCain and the senatorial re-election campaign of Cornyn. “His job is not to redefine the Republican Party or its brand, but to get more Republicans elected to the Senate.”

CQ notes that “Senator Cornyn’s centrist recruiting drive grew out of concern that his caucus was the smallest it had been since 1978 — in large measure because the moderate wing has been almost eliminated. The blueprint came from an unlikely source: Charles E. Schumer of New York, who took over as head of his party’s campaign arm in 2005, when there were 44 Senate Democrats, the smallest number since Herbert Hoover was president. The big gains since were largely because Schumer recruited candidates who were undeniably to the party’s right and could turn that centrism to their advantage in swing states and GOP strongholds. Among the winners were Pennsylvania’s Bob Casey, Montana’s Jon Tester, Missouri’s Claire McCaskill and Virginia’s Jim Webb in 2006 and, last year, Alaska’s Mark Begich and Virginia’s Mark Warner.”

The following "fun facts" come from Larry Sabato, Director of the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics:

- The Republicans learned they can win again (VA, NJ), but only if they can unify their warring factions (NY-23). The Democrats learned they have a different kind of base problem. They have a year to figure out how to get more of their base activists to the polls for another election (the midterms of November 2010) when President Obama won't be on the ballot.
- Beleaguered Republicans got a tonic on Tuesday. The significance of the off-year elections may be overblown, yet the results will help Republicans recruit some strong congressional and state legislative candidates for 2010.
- When a party drops the two big prizes on any election night, it leads the list of losers. 2009 is not a year Democrats will fondly remember. President Obama couldn't help Creigh Deeds duplicate his transformative '08 victory in competitive Virginia and, more surprisingly, Obama couldn't help an ally, Gov. Jon Corzine, in heavily Democratic New Jersey. Obama apparently has coattails only when he is at the top of the ballot, and that must worry shaky Democratic incumbents up in '10.
- Turnout played a huge role in the outcomes in both NJ and VA, with Republicans showing up in droves and Democrats going fishing, at least to some degree. In Virginia, one result of absentee Democrats was the lowest voter turnout for a gubernatorial election in the state's modern two-party history (1969 to 2009). The 2009 turnout of 39.8 percent of the registered voters was the lowest in forty years. Even with all the population growth since 2005, the absolute voter turnout in 2009 (1.97 million) fell below that of four years ago (2.0 million). And the electorate was barely more than half that of 2008 (3.7 million). Astounding.