

US: off-year elections deal losses to Republicans

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The off-year elections held November 8 in several US states provide further evidence of the plummeting political standing of President George W. Bush and the Republican Party. The Republicans lost the two most important contests, for the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia. In the largest state, California, Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was repudiated in a special election in which all four measures he placed on the ballot were rejected by voters. (See “California Special Election: voters reject right-wing measures”)

In both gubernatorial elections the Republican candidates labored under the burden of the unpopularity of the Bush administration. In Virginia, which Bush carried a year ago by 54 percent to 45 percent, Republican Jerry Kilgore, the state’s attorney general, won only 46 percent of the vote, while the Democratic lieutenant governor, Timothy Kaine, won 52 percent. Republican candidates narrowly won the other two races, for lieutenant governor and attorney general, and the Republican Party remains in control of the state legislature, with 58 out of 100 seats, many of them unchallenged by the Democrats. There were two-party contests in only 49 of 100 seats, less than half.

In heavily Democratic New Jersey, Senator Jon Corzine defeated Republican Douglas Forrester by 54 percent to 43 percent. Both candidates are multimillionaires: Corzine is the former chairman of Goldman Sachs, the huge investment bank, while Forrester’s fortune was made in mail-order prescriptions. The two candidates spent a colossal \$72 million, with Corzine outspending his rival by about the margin of his electoral victory. The Democrats also retained control of the state legislature.

In both states, the Republican candidates sought to distance themselves from the administration in Washington. Bush never campaigned in New Jersey, and when he visited Virginia in October to make a speech on terrorism and national defense, Kilgore did not join him.

Their only side-by-side campaign appearance came November 7, on the eve of the vote, at a rally for Republican campaign workers.

The results of the two statewide campaigns did not suggest any significant increase in public support for the Democratic Party, but rather growing hostility to the Bush administration combined with distrust and suspicion of both parties. The Democratic Party is incapable of making any genuine appeal to the mass opposition to Bush because, like the Republicans, it defends the profit system and the interests of the American ruling elite.

A poll by the Pew Research Center, released on Election Day, found that Bush’s approval rating fell to 36 percent, the lowest since he took office. His approval rating among independents—those not affiliated with either the Democrats or Republicans—fell to 29 percent, down from 47 percent in January. The approval ratings of both parties are declining, a phenomenon that demonstrates that millions of people are looking for an alternative.

Tuesday’s balloting also included mayoral campaigns in dozens of cities as well as statewide referendum votes. In New York City, despite a 5-1 registration advantage, the Democrats proved incapable of conducting a serious effort against incumbent Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The media billionaire won easily with a self-financed \$75 million reelection campaign. It was the fourth consecutive municipal election lost by the Democrats in New York City.

The clearest expression of anti-Bush sentiment came in an intra-party contest for the mayor’s office in St. Paul, Minnesota. Mayor Randy Kelly, the incumbent Democrat, endorsed Bush in the presidential election last year, provoking a challenge to his reelection by former city council member Chris Coleman. Both Kelly and Coleman are members of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, as the statewide Democratic organization is known in Minnesota. Coleman won by an overwhelming margin, 69

percent to 31 percent, with polls showing that two-thirds of the voters wanted to punish Kelly for his support of Bush.

The Virginia gubernatorial campaign showed that the vicious political methods of Bush and his chief political aide, Karl Rove, based on appeals to religious fundamentalism and reactionary prejudices, are increasingly ineffective even in a conservative Southern state. Kilgore had been leading in the polls throughout the summer, though narrowly, but Kaine began to pull even in September, as the response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster showed the incompetence of the Bush administration and its indifference to the poorest sections of the working class.

Kilgore's handlers then unleashed what they believed would be an unanswerable barrage of attack ads on Kaine, focusing on his opposition to capital punishment and his past work as a lawyer representing death penalty defendants. The ads featured the families of murder victims emotionally condemning Kaine, with one declaring that Kaine would have opposed the execution of Adolf Hitler. The ads apparently backfired and Kilgore began to fall behind, as polls showed a majority believed the Republican was conducting a dirty campaign.

Kaine's response to the ads was also revealing. The Democrat based his opposition to the death penalty on his religion—he is a churchgoing Catholic—while minimizing the practical significance of his stance. He explained that he was a court-appointed defense lawyer in the two death penalty cases, not a crusader against capital punishment. And he pledged that as governor he would carry out his legal responsibility to rubber-stamp executions, regardless of his personal views.

The Virginia campaign saw a further escalation in the enormous sums expended by the two big business parties. Both Kilgore and Kaine spent over \$20 million to win the governorship of a middle-sized state—an amount sufficient to finance a presidential campaign only 10 years ago. Despite the saturation advertising, voter turnout in Virginia was relatively light, with only 43 percent of those eligible going to the polls.

There were, however, some trends worth noting: the biggest swing against the Republicans, compared to the 2004 presidential vote, came in suburban areas of northern Virginia, including the two fast-growing outer suburban counties, Loudoun and Prince William, which Bush carried by 22,000 votes a year ago, but Kaine won Tuesday.

Kilgore had sought to make illegal immigration an issue

in northern Virginia, denouncing the local government in Herndon, a Fairfax County suburb, for providing a hiring center for immigrant day laborers that asked no questions about their legal status. Kilgore lost Fairfax, the state's most populous county, by better than a 60 to 40 percent margin.

In California there were no candidates on the ballot, but Governor Schwarzenegger and the state Republican Party engineered a special election on a series of eight referendum propositions, four of them placed on the ballot with Schwarzenegger's support: to make it easier to fire public school teachers; to restrict the use of union dues for political contributions; to give the governor greater power to cut state spending; and to take the power to redistrict state and federal electoral boundaries out of the hands of the Democratic-controlled state legislature.

Schwarzenegger portrayed the special election as a continuation of a war against "special interests" that began with his victory in the 2003 recall election. He singled out "public employee union bosses" for vituperation, and spent \$7 million of his own money on campaign commercials. But all four of the Schwarzenegger-backed propositions were defeated. The result was repudiation not just of the Republican governor, but of the method of government-by-referendum employed by corporate interests and right-wing lobbies in California for more than a quarter century. All told, the state paid \$50 million to run a special election and campaign contributors shelled out \$250 million for and against the various propositions, with no results.



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