

Virginia, New Jersey elections: A blow to Obama and the Democrats

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The Democratic Party's loss of governorships in Virginia and New Jersey in Tuesday's off-year elections represented a blow to the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. The elections reflected mounting disquiet and anger over the economic crisis.

In an upset for the Democrats, the New Jersey Republican candidate, former US Attorney Christopher Christie, unseated the incumbent Democratic governor, billionaire Jon Corzine, defeating him by four percentage points. An independent candidate, Chris Daggett, took 5 percent of the vote. Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in the state by 10 percent.

In Virginia, nearly 60 percent of the voters chose Republican former Attorney General Bob McDonnell over Democratic State Senator Creigh Deeds. In addition to the governorship, the Virginia Democrats lost two other statewide offices and suffered a net loss of five seats in the state legislature.

Last year, Barack Obama carried New Jersey with 57 percent of the two-party vote, and Virginia with 53 percent.

The sole consolation for the Democrats was a special election held for the US House of Representatives seat from northern New York vacated by Republican Congressman John McHugh, whom Obama tapped as his secretary of the Army. Democrat Bill Owens won with 49 percent of the vote thanks to a bitter internecine struggle within the Republican Party.

Nationally prominent right-wing Republicans backed Conservative Party candidate Douglas Hoffman and excoriated the Republicans' own candidate, State Assemblywoman Dede Scozzafava for supporting the right to abortion and gay rights. Scozzafava withdrew from the race and endorsed the Democrat, though her name remained on the ballot, garnering 6 percent of the vote.

The White House rejected any suggestion that the elections represented a referendum on President Obama.

Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, told reporters Wednesday, "I don't believe that local elections in Virginia and New Jersey portend a lot about legislative success or political success in the future."

Haley Barbour, the governor of Mississippi and head of the Republican Governors Association, drew a comparison between Tuesday's vote and another off-year election in which Republicans won in both Virginia and New Jersey. That was in

1993 in President Bill Clinton's first term. In the following year's midterm elections, the Republicans picked up 54 congressional seats, winning control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years.

Exit polls showed that the majority of the voters did not see the elections as a referendum on Obama. In Virginia, 24 percent of those asked said that they had cast their ballots to oppose the national Democratic administration, and 20 percent said the same in New Jersey.

In both states, however, overwhelming majorities of those who went to the polls described themselves as worried about the direction of the US economy—89 percent in New Jersey and 85 percent in Virginia.

Among those who described themselves as "very worried" about the economy, the Republican candidates won even stronger majorities—77 percent in Virginia and 61 percent in New Jersey.

More significant—and far more numerous—than those who voted were those who did not.

In New Jersey, for example, in heavily Democratic urban districts like Hudson County, which includes Jersey City; Essex County, which includes Newark; and Camden County, across the river from Philadelphia, the voters who cast ballots for Obama in 2008 stayed away in droves.

Corzine trounced his Republican challenger in each of these counties, but voter turnout hovered between 30 and 40 percent, a record low. Just a year ago, voter turnout was at a record high 73 percent.

In Camden County, Corzine won just 66,000 votes compared to 159,000 who voted for Obama last year. In Essex County, 113,000 voted for Corzine, compared to the 240,000 votes won by Obama in 2008. And in Hudson County, Corzine won 76,000 votes compared to the 154,000 cast for Obama.

Statewide, with 962,000 votes, Corzine won nearly 1.3 million fewer votes than Obama in 2008. On the other hand, Christie, with a little over a million votes, received only 600,000 fewer votes than Republican presidential candidate John McCain.

A similar pattern could be seen in Virginia. In Fairfax County, a Washington DC suburban area, Deeds, the Democratic candidate, won 124,000 votes, just under half of

those cast, compared to 128,000, or 51 percent, for the Republican, McDonnell. In 2008, Obama carried the county by 60 percent with 310,000 votes, compared to 200,000 for McCain.

In the heavily Democratic state capital of Richmond, Deeds won 30,755 votes, nearly 70 percent of those cast, compared to 13,659, or 30 percent for McDonnell. In 2008, Obama won 73,000 votes, nearly 80 percent, while McCain received a little over 18,000, or 20 percent of the vote in the city. Thus, while the city's overall voter turnout was roughly half that of 2008, the Democrats saw their vote cut by 60 percent, compared to a less than 30 percent drop for the Republicans.

Statewide, only 39.8 percent of Virginia voters cast ballots in the election, compared to nearly 75 percent in 2008.

The steepest decline in voting was among those between the ages of 18 and 29, many of whom registered for the first time for the 2008 election and voted overwhelmingly for Obama. While in 2008, these younger voters accounted for 21 percent of all those who went to the polls in Virginia and 17 percent in New Jersey, this year their share of the vote was cut in half, to only 10 percent and 8 percent respectively. Similar falloffs in terms of the percentage of the electorate were recorded among minority and lower income voters.

Obama campaigned in both states, visiting New Jersey five times and speaking at rallies in Camden and Newark on Sunday. *Politico.com* quoted Corzine as saying that Obama had campaigned in the state in order to "excite the base."

Clearly, this effort fell flat, and for good reason. Millions of people who voted for Obama a year ago, including many young, working class and minority voters casting ballots for the first time, did so because they interpreted his slogan of "change" as a repudiation of the Bush administration's wars of aggression, trampling of democratic rights, corporate-friendly policies and attacks on the living standards of the working class.

Since taking office last January, the Obama administration has pursued a right-wing policy that represents in all fundamentals continuity with Bush rather than the promised change. It mocks the 25 million people who are jobless or underemployed, proclaiming an economic recovery based on corporate profits and the stock market rise. While bailing out the banks, Obama has done nothing to provide jobs, instead using mass unemployment as a means of extracting even greater sacrifices from working people.

The administration has continued the occupation of Iraq and is on the verge of dramatically escalating the war in Afghanistan, while further extending it across the border into Pakistan. And it has defended and continued the Bush administration's assault on civil liberties.

Corzine's running mate, State Senator Loretta Weinberg, described the voters as "disgruntled and angry." She said, "When people get angry and hostile, the attitude is 'Throw the bums out,' whoever they are."

This hostility was fed in no small part by Corzine's wealth, gained in a Wall Street career that included heading Goldman Sachs, a prime beneficiary of the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the banks and finance houses. He dramatically outspent his opponent, lavishing some \$20 million of his own money on the campaign.

A similar phenomenon took place in New York City, where incumbent Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the richest man in the city, spent an estimated \$100 million on his campaign—roughly \$200 for every vote.

He outspent his opponent, City Comptroller Bill Thompson, a lackluster and virtually unknown Democrat who offered no alternative to the billionaire mayor, by a margin of 14 to 1. Nonetheless, he won just over half the vote, barely defeating Thompson by a 5 percent margin, far less than had been predicted in the polls. Much of the opposition to Bloomberg stemmed from hostility to his use of his immense wealth to buy himself a third term, overturning a referendum that had imposed term limits.

Democrats also suffered defeat in New York City's two largest suburban counties. In Westchester, which includes some of the city's wealthiest suburban enclaves as well as poorer urban areas, Republican Rob Astorino unseated three-term Democratic County Executive Andrew Spano, despite the Democrats having twice as many registered voters in the county.

In Long Island's Nassau County, with a population of 1.3 million, Republicans took back the county legislature and left Democratic County Executive Thomas Suozzi with a lead of just 237 votes over his Republican challenger, Edward Mangano. With absentee and provisional ballots still to be counted, the race is undecided. In both counties, turnout was extremely low.

While the Republicans may have scored limited electoral gains as a result of the growing anger over unemployment and the reactionary policies of the Obama administration, Tuesday's elections by no means signal a turn to the right. Rather, millions who are opposed to war, social inequality and the defense of the banks at the expense of working people can find no voice within the capitalist two-party system.

The inevitable response to the elections by the Obama White House, as well as the Democrats in Congress and in the statehouses, will be a further lurch to the right, bringing the present administration into an ever more open conflict with the interests of the masses of American working people.



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