Democrats make gains in off-year elections

Patrick Martin
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The off-year elections Tuesday in Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia and New Jersey were a significant rebuff to President Donald Trump, with Democrats winning the governorship of Kentucky, taking control of the state legislature in Virginia, and retaining control of the state legislature in New Jersey, while Republicans won only the governorship of Mississippi.

The outcome will undoubtedly be cited by the Democrats as a vindication of their CIA-inspired campaign to impeach Trump on national-security grounds, focusing on his failure to mount a sufficiently aggressive anti-Russian intervention in the Middle East and Ukraine. But there is no indication of any groundswell of popular support for impeachment on such a right-wing basis.

Popular hostility towards Trump is driven by opposition to his attacks on immigrants and democratic rights more generally, to his open appeals to racist and fascist forces, and to his support for tax cuts and deregulation for the corporate and financial aristocracy at the expense of working people.

Neither big-business party addressed the growing movement of the working class in defense of jobs, living standards and social programs, although both are acutely aware of it and fearful of any challenge to the capitalist system. The Virginia campaign, for example, came in the midst of a major strike by autoworkers at Mack Volvo Trucks, while the Kentucky campaign came in the wake of a massive mobilization of public-school teachers, who came into direct conflict with the administration of Republican Governor Matt Bevin.

The narrow victory of Democrat Andy Beshear over Bevin was the most politically significant result of the night, since Trump held an election eve rally in Lexington to boost Bevin's campaign, making another of the fascistic appeals he has delivered at a series of such events over the past month.

Trump portrayed the Democrats and Beshear as "socialists" and "far left radicals" who "want to erase our traditions, our culture, our history, and our heroes." Since Andy Beshear is himself the privileged son of the Democratic governor who held office just before Bevin, portraying him as a socialist extremist is absurd.

Even more delusional was Trump's description of the Kentucky economy as the greatest in the state's history. The eastern third of the state, once a major coal field, remains in deep depression, with Murray Coal, the biggest single mining company, filing for bankruptcy last week. Miners in Harlan County had to blockade a railhead to prevent coal shipments and force payment of back pay owed to them by another bankrupt firm.

Bevin went into the election as the most unpopular governor in the United States, as measured by opinion polls. But Trump nonetheless declared, "He's done a fantastic job. And we're sending a signal by doing that to the rest of the country, to the rest of the world."

Trump spent most of the speech denouncing impeachment, claiming, "The Democrats' outrageous conduct has created an angry majority that will vote the Do-nothing Democrats the hell out of office soon." The result of the election in Kentucky suggests rather that the public regards the conflict in Washington that has produced the impeachment inquiry with considerable indifference, or with hostility towards both sides.

Beshear received 709,673 votes to Bevin's 704,523, actually outperforming the Democratic presidential campaign in 2016, when Hillary Clinton won only 628,854 votes in the state. While the Democratic vote rose by more than 80,000 compared to 2016, the Republican vote plunged by 500,000.

Turnout was heavy by the standards of off-year elections, but still quite low, just over 40 percent of registered voters. Bevin was deeply unpopular because of his attacks on health care and public education. He vilified striking teachers and acted to cut their pensions,

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and he ended KYNECT, the state's Obamacare plan in which hundreds of thousands had enrolled, particularly through the expansion of Medicaid.

Beshear's victory speech included a pledge to make public education the central priority of his administration. But any illusions teachers may hold, likely based on the conviction that no governor could be more hostile to them than Bevin, will be quickly dispelled by the experience of an equally right-wing Democratic administration. Beshear, whose campaign imposed a de facto ban on attacking Trump, will hobnob with the union leaders and posture as the best friend of teachers, but he will carry out the dictates of big business and Wall Street just as faithfully as the Republican he defeated.

In Virginia, Democrats gained control of both houses of the state legislature, overturning narrow Republican majorities. The state Senate shifted from 20-19 Republican, with one vacancy, to 21-19 Democratic. The House of Delegates shifted from 51-49 Republican to 53-47 Democratic. No Democratic incumbents lost, while at least three Republican incumbents did, including the last Republican state legislator in northern Virginia, defeated by Democrat Dan Helmer, a former Army intelligence officer in Afghanistan, Iraq and South Korea.

Turnout was up significantly, from about 1,250,000 votes in the last off-year election in 2015 to nearly two million votes this year. But this represented only 36 percent of the state's 5.6 million registered voters.

The Democratic National Committee poured in financial resources, and Democratic candidates heavily outspent their Republican opponents. Democrats now control all statewide executive offices, from Governor Ralph Northam on down, as well as both houses of the legislature, giving them full responsibility for the right-wing policies that will be carried out in relation to health care, public education, and the build-up of the police and other repressive forces.

The only significant victory for the Republicans was in the Mississippi governor's race, where Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves defeated Attorney General Jim Hood in the contest to succeed Republican Governor Phil Bryant, who was compelled to leave office after two terms. Reeves won by a margin of better than 50,000 votes out of more than 800,000 cast.

Hood ran a right-wing campaign, opposing abortion rights and gun control and presenting himself as a "good ole boy" throwback to the Southern Democrats of the previous century. Reeves, like Bevin, also hosted a rally for Trump, held in Tupelo, Mississippi on Friday, November 1, at which Trump made fascistic appeals nearly identical those he made three days later in Kentucky.

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