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N.J. LOSS + VA. LOSS = GOOD NEWS FOR THE GOP?

Conventional wisdom has it that today is going to be a bad one for the GOP. With its gubernatorial candidate trailing badly in New Jersey and its candidate for governor in Virginia having squandered what was once a double-digit lead, the “experts” appear increasingly certain that the Republican Party will lose both of these most prominent off-year contests and that this will be exceptionally bad for the party. I’m not sure I agree.

Don’t get me wrong. I’ll certainly concede that things look bleak on the electoral front and that it is likely that both Doug Forrester (New Jersey) and Jerry Kilgore (Virginia) will lose today. I’m just not convinced that this will necessarily be bad for the GOP.

In my first-of-the-year forecast piece, I predicted that things would remain normal in New Jersey, with a Democrat once again winning that governorship, and that things would return to normal in Virginia, with the GOP recapturing the statehouse from the upstart Democrats who managed by sheer luck to win it four years ago.

What I could not have known when I made that prediction was that Virginia Republicans would nominate a man, Attorney General Kilgore, who would turn out to be one of the poorest and least likeable candidates to be nominated by either party for any office anywhere in the country in a long time. Throughout the campaign, Kilgore missed opportunities, focused heavily and stubbornly on peripheral issues, and managed to turn off even die-hard conservative voters. He now appears poised to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in what should have been a cake walk, losing to a self-identified liberal who is unafraid to raise taxes and who gets a 0 (that’s *zero*) rating from the NRA in a what is generally an aggressively pro gun state. In fact, if the Democrats could convince the Republican Party to nominate Kilgore for President in ’08, then a ticket featuring some combination of Walter Mondale and George McGovern could promise to double taxes and to surrender to al Qaeda unconditionally and would still win the White House in a landslide.

Given all of this, one might reasonably conclude that my expectation that tonight will be a relatively good night for the Republican Party is a little bit, well, insane. So, let me explain.

Once it is official that the Democrats have swept the off-year biggies, I fully expect that the mainstream media will declare that the party-preference die has been cast, and they will start with the stories about “national discontent” and predictions of big Democratic gains in the 2006 Congressional midterms. And

In this Issue

Election Day Update

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the Democrats, foolishly trusting the media as an “unbiased” source, will take in this story line and begin to plot their midterm strategy accordingly. Needless to say, this will be a mistake.

Desperate as they are for any semblance of positive news, the Democrats will spin the New Jersey and Virginia contests as proof that Republicans are out of touch and that the Dean-Reid-Pelosi strategy of acting like spoiled children is yielding positive results. Recall that in 2001, Democrats captured the governors mansion in both New Jersey and Virginia and consequently deluded themselves into believing that those victories foretold great things for the 2002 midterms. Recall as well that things didn’t work out that way and that said midterms were actually quite disastrous for the Democratic Party, which managed to become one of only a handful of parties in the last century to lose seats to the President’s party in a midterm.

What the Democrats forgot then and appear likely to forget again is the old adage popularized by one of their own, the late Speaker of the House Tip O’Neil, that all politics is local. In 2001, the Democrat (Jim McGreevey) won New Jersey because New Jersey has considerably more Democratic voters than Republican voters. The Democrat (Mark Warner) won Virginia because he is a multi-millionaire who was able to convince Virginia voters that he is a sportsman who respects the Second Amendment. This year, the Democrat (Sen. Jon Corzine) will win New Jersey because New Jersey has considerably more Democratic voters than Republican voters and because he’s a billionaire, while the Democrat (Tim Kaine) will win Virginia because his opponent has run a terrible campaign. Anyone who reads any “national trend” into these results will be engaging in wishful thinking or no thinking at all.

And that brings us back to Dean, Reid, and Pelosi. These three perennial wishful thinkers will almost certainly determine that such a national trend exists and will therefore continue with their current strategy of “government by temper tantrum,” believing that since it has worked thus far that it will continue to work effectively through the midterms. And this, in turn, will increase the likelihood that the GOP will actually surprise the “experts” again, and hold its own next year.

The thing to watch for now is how quickly and how enthusiastically the media and the Democratic Party make the “national trend” argument. If, as I expect, they beat that theme into the ground swiftly and viciously, then I will feel increasingly confident about the GOP’s chances in the midterms. If, on the other hand, that storyline is largely downplayed, I will begin to wonder seriously if Howard Dean hasn’t been kidnapped and replaced with a life-like robot which, unlike the real Dr. Dean, actually has the sense God gave a goose.

All things considered, I think that both Mark and I would rather that Kilgore would win today, since Kaine will almost certainly try to raise our taxes again. But if we can’t have that, then I think we’ll both settle for having the Democratic Party overconfident and overly confused, which is all but certain to be the outcome of a Democratic sweep of the off-year races today.

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