

2017 Election Recap and Analysis

November 8, 2017

One year after businessman Donald Trump stunned the Washington political-media complex, his party suffered stinging down-ballot defeats, losing two gubernatorial contests, two attorneys general offices and a first-in-the-nation vote to expand Medicaid coverage.

The Democratic clean sweep—the first national temperature reading of voters on the first election day since Trump's inauguration—spanned coast-to-coast, penetrated even hyperlocal contests and marked the party's best day at the polls since Barack Obama's reelection in 2012.

After taking it on the chin in a series of special House elections, including one in Georgia in which the party cast the race as an explicit referendum on the president, Democrats got their groove back Tuesday. Here's what their wins, which represent a tremendous psychological boost to the party, mean for the country's politics and policies.

Virginia

Gubernatorial winner: Ralph Northam, Democrat

With the Virginia gubernatorial election of 2013, the governor's mansion aligned with the White House for the first time in 30 years, the first time since 1977 that commonwealth voters elected as governor a member of the same party as the sitting president (then Barack Obama).

However, Republican Ed Gillespie, whose 2014 campaign for US Senate radically outperformed expectations and gave GOPers hope for another possible upset, fell victim to a striking anti-Trump sentiment in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, where the president's approval rating registered just 40 percent in exit polling.

Of the 57 percent who disapproved of Trump, Gillespie lost 11 to 87 percent in the same survey. One in three voters said demonstrating their opposition to the president was the reason for their vote.

The intensity gap coming into election day favored Northam, the state's current lieutenant governor, but polls had begun to narrow in recent weeks, and some even tracked Gillespie with a lead.

Ultimately, however, Northam won by a resounding nine points, claiming more votes than any previous Virginia governor. His margin of victory was greater than both Hillary Clinton's (by four), and current Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe (by six).

Further down ballot, Democrats swept the other two executive offices (lieutenant governor and attorney general) and picked up at least 14 seats in the House of Delegates. Another four are so close they might lead to a recount. The outcome might result in a clean 50-50 split in the lower chamber, while Republicans hold a narrow 21-19 advantage in the state Senate.

New Jersey

Gubernatorial winner: Phil Murphy, Democrat

Democrat Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive and Obama-era US Ambassador to Germany, routed GOP Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno by 13 points after eight years of Republican control.

Republican Gov. Chris Christie saw his popularity decline sharply after the state's "Bridgegate" scandal, his prolonged absences from the state while pursuing the GOP nomination for president and, later, his full-throated embrace of Donald Trump. While Guadagno strived to put distance between herself and Christie, her association was too great to overcome.

Like Virginia, New Jersey voters are inclined to elect as governor a member of the party opposite the president's. The victory portends a Democratic victory next year should incumbent Democratic US Senator Bob Menendez, who is facing a raft of corruption charges, leave office.

Murphy's win in New Jersey makes the state the seventh in the nation in which Democrats control both the executive and legislative branches. His win also means a Democrat will serve as the state's attorney general, who serves as an appointed member of the governor's executive cabinet.

Utah

Congressional special election winner: John Curtis, Republican

In one of the evening's few bright spots for Republicans, crimson red Utah elected as its newest congressman a former Democrat who voted against Donald Trump and has criticized his administration.

Provo Mayor John Curtis, a moderate Republican, will serve the final year of former Rep. Jason Chaffetz, now a Fox News personality. Curtis defeated a series of more conservative rivals earlier this summer.

Health care

Maine ballot measure: Medicaid expansion, Yes

For the first time in the nation, voters in Maine were directly asked whether to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. The result was a resounding rejection of Governor Paul LePage, a Republican who has five times vetoed efforts by the state legislature to expand Medicaid coverage to the state's poorest.

The ballot measure, which passed by a nearly 20-point margin, makes the state the 32nd to adopt the ACA provision, bringing roughly 80,000 low-income Mainers into the fold of Medicaid.

Ohio ballot measure: Drug prices cap, No

The health care industry also notched a win in Ohio, fighting off a statewide ballot initiative that would have required state agencies to purchase prescription drugs at prices no higher than those paid by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, which historically secures the lowest drug prices in the country.

The fight, which summoned tens of millions in spending from both sides, became the most expensive ballot measure in Ohio's history.

A similar vote failed in California last year, but progressives are looking to try again next year in South Dakota.

Mayoral contests

Atlanta, Georgia: Nonpartisan runoff, Keisha Lance Bottoms + Mary Norwood

The next mayor of Atlanta will be a woman, only the city's second in its 170-year history.

But for the first time in some four decades, the city's mayor may be white, setting off an emotional, racially-tinged proxy battle as the city's demographics swings amid a booming economy and changing skyline.

The crowded field of a dozen candidates for mayor was whittled Tuesday to just two, both current city councilwomen. Keisha Lance Bottoms, who is black, earned 26 percent; and Mary Norwood, who is white, notched 21 points.

In 1973, the year after the city's last white mayor lost reelection, Atlanta became a majority-black city. By 1990, black residents constituted 67 percent of the city. But 20 years later, the 2010 census put the city's black population at 54 percent. Today, as young, white millennials move into the city and families leave the suburbs for the conveniences of the perimeter, some political handicappers believe the percentage of black residents has fallen below the halfway mark.

For much of the race, Norwood led the field by double digits but in recent days Bottoms, a self-identified Democrat, surged to first. Both will advance now to a December runoff.

Bottoms is the anointed heir of current Mayor Kasim Reed, who first won election in 2009 over Norwood by a mere 714 votes.

Then, as now, the prospect that Atlanta, which for 40 years has elected a mayor that resembles the city's largest voter bloc, has set off a rash of questions whether the racial identity of the mayor of America's so-called "Black Mecca" matters anymore.

New York City winner: Democrat De Blasio

Incumbent Mayor Bill de Blasio handily cruised to reelection Tuesday over chief rival Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican state assemblywoman, by a dizzying 39 points.

Manchester, New Hampshire: Democrat Joyce Craig

Joyce Craig was elected Tuesday as the first woman to lead to New Hampshire's largest city, and the first Democrat in more than a decade. Craig defeated incumbent Republican Ted Gatsas by just under 1,500 votes.

Her bid to lead Manchester drew to the state a raft of possible Democratic 2020 presidential contenders eager to curry favor with voters—and with who they believed would become the mayor of the biggest town (with just over 110,000 residents) in New Hampshire, whose presidential primaries are first in the nation.

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