

The 1991 Off-Year Elections: Lessons for 1992

Editor's Note: Though there were only a handful of statewide elections last November, three proved of considerable interest. New Jersey and Pennsylvania share a long common border, but the results of their balloting seemed to point in wildly different directions. In Pennsylvania, Democrat Harris Wofford's victory over Republican Dick Thornburgh was widely interpreted as a slap at the Bush administration, in whose ranks Thornburgh had prominently served as Attorney General, and as signalling voters' desires for more activist government, especially in the area of health care. But in neighboring New Jersey, the Republicans won a sweeping victory in state House and Senate elections—going from minority status in both chambers to two-thirds majorities in both. The results were the culmination of a full-fledged revolt against tax hikes passed the previous year by the Democrats under the leadership of Governor Jim Florio, and a call for limits on government spending.

In Pennsylvania, a mainstream Northeastern Republican was soundly beaten, while in New Jersey a mainstream Northeastern Democrat (Florio) was firmly spanked. What does all this say about the electorate's mood? Political scientists Cliff Zukin and Michael Young examine these divergent state results.

Then, Public Perspective takes another look at David Duke's support in Louisiana, based on further analysis of the exit poll data on his 39% showing in the November 16 gubernatorial run-off with Edwin Edwards.

THE 1991 ELECTION IN NEW JERSEY

By Cliff Zukin

In a move that caught almost all politicians, journalists and pollsters by surprise, voters in New Jersey opted for a change in government last November 5. What made this particularly surprising is that Governor Jim Florio was not up for re-election.

But New Jersey voters reacted with such anger to the Governor's tax package of 1990 that by the time the electoral smoke had cleared the Democrats had not only lost both the State Senate and Assembly, but had effectively lost control of the government, as the Republicans achieved veto-proof majorities of better than two-to-one in each chamber. The 80 person Assembly went from a 43 to 37 Democratic majority to a bloated Republican margin of 58 to 22; the Republicans picked up 10 seats in the 40-person Senate to control that body by a solid 27 to 13 majority.

It was an election that has left policy making in the state in disarray. The results of the election were so one-sided, and the meaning so clear, that Democrats seriously contemplated using a lame duck

session to beat Republicans to the punch in repealing a one percent increase in the state sales tax, if not the *entire* 2.8 billion dollar tax package.

The story of what happened in New Jersey in the 1991 election is distinctly state-focused. Those looking for national import in the election or commonalities between what happened in New Jersey, the Wofford victory in neighboring Pennsylvania and the Mabus defeat in Mississippi run the risk of badly misleading themselves. While the dynamics of what happened in the New Jersey legislative elections will no doubt play out in similar ways in other states, they have little portent for next year's national election.

The Setting

The New Jersey story started in 1989, when candidates Jim Florio-D and Jim Courter-R fought to succeed popular two-term incumbent Governor Thomas Kean-R. What both men knew, but largely kept out of the campaign, was that the incoming governor would be facing a substantial hole in the state's budget. Courter

took "the pledge" of no new taxes; Florio left himself some wiggle room but, learning the lessons from Walter Mondale's 1984 campaign, neither candidate thought the electorate could be approached directly with the idea that "some new taxes will be necessary."

Shortly after assuming office, Florio had to confront a double-barreled dose of grim fiscal reality. The budget Florio inherited had a \$600 million shortfall (on a base of just over 14 billion). Moreover, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled the state's system of financing public education—based largely on the property tax—unconstitutional. The State was looking at a gap of potentially 3 billion dollars going into fiscal 91. The Governor's response was a 2.8 billion tax package, which increased the state sales tax from 6 to 7% and broadened its base, increased the State income tax on top wage earners and decreased reliance on property taxes by expanding the homestead rebate program. Controlling both houses of the legislature, the Governor easily moved his program into law. Not a single Republican in the legislature voted for the tax package.

At this point in the summer of 1990, most partisan and non-partisan observers in the state agreed that the Republicans did a much better job of managing the politics of the tax increase than did the Democrats. While it is always much easier to attack than to explain a tax increase, the governor's office did a weak job in getting any mitigating message out—that the tax increase was necessary, that it could be blamed on the policies of the previous Republican administration, that it was progressive and would actually lower the tax burden for part of the middle class, etc. The Democrats were badly beaten in the strategy game of issue definition. The label that stuck, and was to become the single most prominent label in the rhetoric of the 1991 legislative elections was "Florio's 2.8 billion dollar tax increase."

Public Reaction to the Tax Plan

Public reaction to the tax package was swift, and strongly negative. In March of 1990, Florio's job rating was quite respectable for a New Jersey governor: 42% said he was doing an "excellent" or "good" job, 34% an "only fair" one, and just 14% gave him a rating of "poor." After the tax plan was unveiled and passed, however, there was a tremendous loss of public support. The July 1990 Eagleton survey found less than one-quarter of New Jerseyans (23%) saying Florio was doing an excellent or good job; his poor rating had jumped from 14 to 32%. Unfavorable "impressions" of the governor outnumbered favorable ones by a whopping 55 to 17%.

Moreover, the July survey left little doubt of the reason for Florio's precipitous slide—the tax package. The vast majority—58%—of New Jersey residents said they felt the Governor's handling of state taxes was poor, compared to just 13% who said he was doing *either* an excellent or good job on this score. Just 22% were willing to temper their dislike of Florio and/or new taxes enough to offer the lukewarm rating of "only fair." The Eagleton numbers paint a picture of an electorate uncompromising in its rejection of the tax package of 1990. Consider the following:

*7 in 10 thought spending should have been further reduced before taxes were raised.

*More disapproved than approved of the sales tax increase by a margin of 79 to 19%.

*More disapproved than approved of the provision to raise the tax rate on single taxpayers earning over \$35,000 by a similarly lopsided margin of 69 to 25%.

*By a margin of 3 to 1 more disapproved than approved of extending the sales tax to paper products.

*Two-thirds of New Jerseyans said they found both the sales and income tax increases as "not very" or "not at all" acceptable to them.

The Climate for the 1991 Election

Caught in the same economic climate plaguing the entire Northeast and the general recession, there was little good news for Florio or the Democrats as 1990 turned into 1991. The Democrats continued to be under siege as Republicans pointed to the fall elections. The Republicans had high hopes for capturing one if not both houses of the legislature, for a variety of reasons over and above the general economic climate and the Governor's unpopularity.

First, in a phenomenon much like the president's party losing congressional seats in the following midterm, every governor in New Jersey's modern political history has lost seats in the subsequent legislative election as the electorate contracts back to its base of core voters. In 1985, for example, Tom Kean won reelection by a 40-point margin and picked up 24 Assembly seats in the process. But in 1987, even with Kean enjoying a job rating of 70% excellent or good, the GOP lost 8 of those seats. Even had Florio been popular, he would have been expected to lose half of the six seats he had brought with him in the 1989 gubernatorial, effectively changing the assembly from 43-37 to even.

In addition to this basic dynamic, the state had gone through reapportionment, becoming at least one or two seats more Republican in the process. Observers also noted that a number of top Democratic vote getters were retiring, with others being forced to run in new districts, modifying the traditional advantage of incumbency in low visibility races.

To this already bubbling cauldron we add a still unpopular governor (Florio was rated as doing an excellent or good job by just 23% of New Jerseyans a month and a half before the election), voter preoccupation with fiscal conditions ("taxes" and "the economy" were the only issues mentioned by double digit proportions in response to the question of "what is the most important problem facing New Jersey" in Eagleton's September survey), and while anger had dissipated slightly in the 14 months since July 1990, it had not changed its essential character. Less than two months before the election, just under 60% still considered the tax increase "not very" or "not at all acceptable." In addition, most thought that they personally had been hard hit by the tax package: 62% said they were paying more in sales tax, 54% said they were paying more in income tax, and 59% (incorrectly) said they were paying more in property taxes.

Voters' anger in the 1991 elections was real. Over a year after the taxes were passed, 55% continued to describe themselves as either "very" or "somewhat" angry. Moreover, New Jerseyans had a ready target upon which their anger could be focused—Jim Florio. When asked "who do you feel is most responsible for the changes in New Jersey taxes," 51% named Florio alone, with another 16% volunteering him along with the legislature as the central player in the tax drama.

While district elections are generally run on local issues, the Republican party did an excellent job of running an integrated and unified campaign that they kept tightly focused on the governor and on the tax package. Republican campaigns throughout the state attempted to tap into voter anger and to structure the issue of the election as sending "a mes-

sage to Florio.” One Republican pollster acknowledged in a post-election analysis that Florio was the key symbol for the Republicans. He had conducted question wording experiments where the word “Florio” was included in some questions but not in others and attested to differences of as much as 20 points in public response.

Putting all of the factors together—a stagnant economy, an unpopular governor closely and personally linked with a resented tax program, the traditional mid-term loss of legislative seats by the governor’s party, redistricting favoring the Republicans, and fewer Democratic incumbents seeking re-election—the ingredients for a Republican landslide were clearly present. Moreover, it is worth noting that only the first of these forces is *not* New Jersey focused, supporting the general assertion that it was state issues and forces, as opposed to national con-

cerns, that best explains what happened in the 1991 election in the Garden State.

Looking Ahead to 1992

The one national factor that did come into play in 1991 was the economic recession. And the recent poll numbers in New Jersey suggest that despite its history of Republican voting at the presidential level, dissatisfaction with George Bush’s performance in this critical area should make the state quite competitive in 1992.

The latest Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll recorded a steep drop in the president’s overall job performance rating between June and October of this year—from 69 to 56% positive (ratings of either “excellent” or “good”), paralleling results in states around the country.

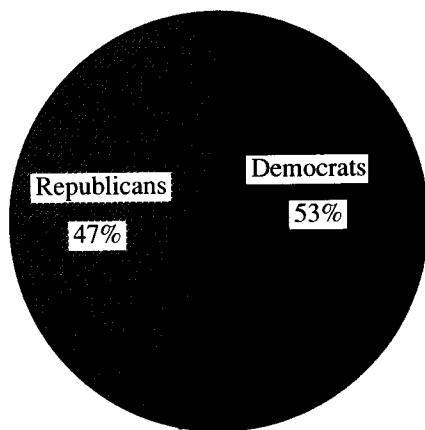
Perhaps more significant to a state hurting from the recession and facing more bad economic news in the coming

year, is Bush’s weakness in handling domestic concerns. Just 20% of all New Jersey residents give Bush positive grades for his handling “of the problems of the economy,” compared to twice as many who give him a rating of “poor,” while 36% say he is doing an “only fair” job in this area. Just 22% rate Bush excellent or good in his handling of the country’s social problems. Finally, when asked if they plan to vote for Bush “or the Democratic candidate in next year’s presidential election,” just 35% report a standing commitment to support the president, while another 24% say they plan to vote Democratic, regardless of the candidate.

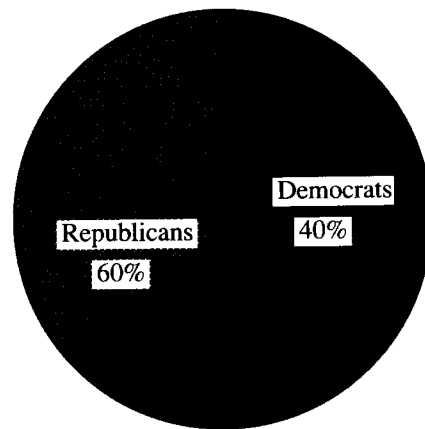
The Republican victory last November 5 was due to voters looking backwards at the performance of their chief executive over the previous two years and finding him wanting. That gaze will soon be turned on George Bush, and it remains to be seen if they will be any more charitable when they give him his report card.

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Voting for the New Jersey Lower House, 1989 and 1991: An Unprecedented Partisan Swing



Total Democratic and Republican Assembly Vote Percentages, 1989

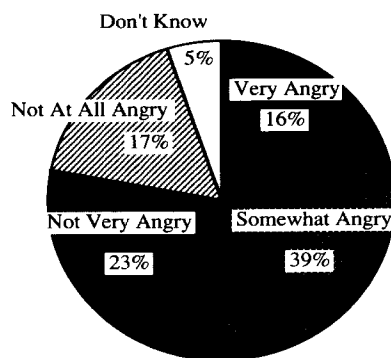


Total Democratic and Republican Assembly Vote Percentages, 1991

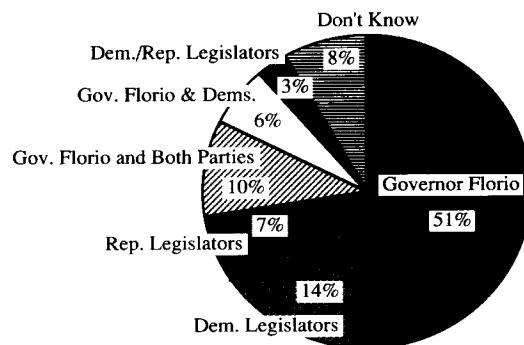
Number of New Jersey House Districts in Which the 1989 to 1991 Swing to the Republicans Was:

20 percentage points or more	6
15 to 19 points	13
10 to 14 points	10
5 to 9 points	6
0 to 4 points	4
a Pro-Democratic swing	1
TOTAL DISTRICTS	40

A Vote Against Taxes and Jim Florio



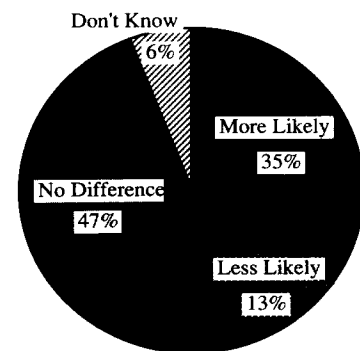
Question: Now that the tax program has been in place for about a year, how do you feel—are you angry, somewhat angry, not very angry, or not angry? Survey of September 11-19, 1991.



Question: Who do you feel is the most responsible for the changes in New Jersey taxes—Governor Florio, the Democratic Legislators, or the Republican Legislators? Survey of September 11-19, 1991.



Question: How would you rate the job Jim Florio is doing as governor—excellent, good, only fair, or poor? Survey of September 11-19, 1991.



Question: If a candidate in your district campaigns against Governor Jim Florio, will this make you more likely to support that candidate, less likely to support that candidate, or won't it make any difference? Survey of October 22-30, 1991.

Source: Surveys by Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll.