

# Lesson of the 1997 GOP Victories: Keep a Strong Base Among Moderates

By James Barnes

Off-year elections are unreliable predictors for what could happen in next year's midterm elections, but the Republican victories in the 1997 New Jersey and Virginia governors' races point the way to how the GOP could expand its congressional majorities. Although the two Republican winners, New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman and former Virginia Attorney General James S. Gilmore III, ran very different races, both managed a feat that often eludes Republican candidates: they held the party's conservative base without scaring away moderate swing voters.

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According to the Voter News Service exit poll of New Jersey voters, 53% described themselves as moderates, and Whitman won 45% of them while 49% backed Democratic nominee James E. McGreevey. But Whitman still defeated McGreevey 47% to 46%. In Virginia, an exit poll conducted by Edison Media Research for a consortium that included the Associated Press, CNN and *The Washington Post* found that 49% of the state's voters were self-described moderates, with Gilmore winning 46% compared to the 53% who backed Lieutenant Governor Donald S. Beyer. Gilmore, however, won the election, 56% to 43%.

## The Benchmark Is 40%

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Take last year's Senate race in the Garden State, when Democratic Representative Robert Torricelli defeated Republican Representative Dick Zimmer 53% to 43%. Zimmer's share of the conservative voters in that election was 70%. (This year, Whitman only carried 65% of conservative voters.) But Zimmer overwhelmingly lost the moderate vote, which made up 55% of the electorate that year. Torricelli took 58% of the center piece of the pie while Zimmer won only 39%.

This pattern appeared in every key close Senate race that Republicans lost in 1996. The only Republican incumbent defeated in 1996 was South Dakota's Larry Pressler who lost to Democratic Representative Tim Johnson 51% to 49%. Even though 42% of the state's voters called themselves conservatives, and Pressler carried this group 75% to 25%, he still came up short. Ironically, although Pressler has occasionally aligned himself with the dwindling bloc of GOP moderates in the Senate, back in South Dakota self-described moderates—45% of the state's voters—gave Johnson a huge 67% to 32% majority and the election.

Even North Carolina's hard-right Republican Senator Jesse Helms, who was

reelected to a fifth term in 1996, managed to capture 44% of North Carolina's self-described moderates in his rematch with former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt.

Democrats in the Senate who won reelection in close contests in 1996, like Montana's Max Baucus and Iowa's Tom Harkin, did so because of their ability to count on overwhelming support from moderate voters. Harkin captured moderates 61% to 39% and withstood a tough challenge from GOP Representative Jim Ross Lightfoot, winning 52% to 47%. Baucus was backed by moderates 63% to 32% and won his race 50% to 45% over Republican Dennis Rehberg.

Likewise, Democratic Senate candidates who narrowly managed to hold on to open seats in the South—Max Cleland in Georgia, and Mary Landrieu in Louisiana—also held their Republican opponents to less than 40% of the moderate vote. That percentage was a pretty good predictor for the results of the 1996 Senate races: Republicans who couldn't crack the 40% mark among moderates didn't win.

## Change Tone and Issues

The party's sharp deficit among moderates “is dead weight that's holding us back,” said GOP pollster Fred Steeper. He noted that in every election since 1980, the national average for House Republican candidates among moderate voters has been 40% to 43%. After the GOP took control of Congress, Steeper said he expected the incumbency factor to increase the GOP's share of moderate voters. But that didn't happen in 1996 when the VNS exit poll showed that only 43% of the self-described moderates said they voted for a Republican House candidate, the same percentage as in 1994.

## **Main Currents in American Politics**

While Steeper strongly cautioned against shifting the Republican agenda away from its conservative base, he added that some change in tone and balance of issues that Republicans stress is probably necessary to avoid alienating too many moderate voters. "We need some sort of marginal change in the communication of our message that wins back some moderates, even though we don't need 50%," said Steeper. "We've got to pick and choose our issues more carefully so we don't get cornered, like in our efforts to balance the budget [we're seen] as hurting kids and the elderly."

### **New Proposals for Education**

Republicans on Capitol Hill seemed to have gotten that message in 1997. For instance, even as the party got caught up in a last-minute fight with President Clinton over a school-voucher plan that many conservative lawmakers wanted to insert in the annual appropriations bill for the District of Columbia, other Republicans were carefully repositioning themselves on the education issue.

Abandoning their 1995-96 rhetoric about eliminating the Department of Education, Republicans have touted proposals such as bloc grants to the states and IRA-like tax-free accounts for parents to set aside money for school. These accounts could be tapped to pay for everything from a computer to tuition at a private school. This avoids the nettlesome arguments over church-state issues and the diversion of public funds to wealthy parents who send their kids to expensive private schools that have bedeviled voucher proponents for years.

The exit polls from New Jersey and Virginia showed that Republicans have a long way to go to turn the education issue to their advantage. Voters rating education as a top concern overwhelmingly backed the two Democratic gubernatorial candidates. But as Republicans develop their own affirmative case for improving education, they will be able to reach moderates who in the past have been frightened by some of the GOP's more aggressive posturing on the issue.

### **Government Size**

Results from the 1997 New Jersey exit poll may also provide an early clue on how voters are viewing the role of the government as Clinton seeks compromises with a Republican-controlled Congress. At least in that state, the momentum for a smaller government continues to grow. In 1992, Clinton carried this traditional swing state in presidential elections by a narrow 43% to 41%. That year, 52% of the Garden State's voters said they would rather have a government that costs less and provided fewer services, while 41% said they wanted a government that provided more services and also cost more.

In the Whitman-McGreevey race, New Jersey's voters ratified their opinion from 1992, and then some: 58% said they would rather have government cost less and provide fewer

services, while only 32% indicated they wanted a more expensive government that provided more services.

### **Stock Market Probably Won't Be a Major Issue**

One of the more interesting political developments of the fall was the dog that didn't bark. When the Dow Jones tumbled more than 500 points in October, neither the public nor politicians got very excited. That stands in marked contrast to the period after the 1987 stock crash when Democrats attempted to use the market's woes as an indictment of President Reagan's economic policies.

In November of that year, the eventual Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Governor Michael S. Dukakis, told a New York City audience that the stock collapse was "a government-made disaster." Dukakis said that Reagan's first-term tax cuts and defense buildup made a joke of his promise to also balance the budget. Former Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt quickly called for more spending cuts and tax increases to improve the "fundamentals" of the economy. Missouri Representative Richard A. Gephardt echoed the sentiment of many Democrats blaming the Reagan-80s cut-throat culture among Wall Street traders. "Takeover attempts, putting together financing, trashing companies, the transition can go on years," said the self-styled Missouri populist. "It's killing us."

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Then Senator Albert Gore Jr. attacked Reagan's low-key handling of the collapse in stock prices. "You know what would have happened if Franklin Roosevelt or Truman or Kennedy or any Democratic President had been in office when that stock market went down 500 points in one day?" asked Gore rhetorically. "He would have come out and spoken clearly to the American people and said, 'Here's what the problem is, we're gathering all of the leaders and experts, and we're going to hammer out a solution to this,'" Gore said.

Of course, ten years later, the Clinton Administration took an even lower-key response. President Reagan at least held a press conference a few days after the 1987 crash to address concerns about the markets. The day after the 1997 stock slide, President Clinton was content to offer a crisp vote of confidence on the state of the economy in a speech largely devoted to education.

**GOP Needs Economic Agenda**

But the uncharacteristically laconic response from Clinton was an accurate reflection of the public's current confidence in the economy. According to a poll conducted by Yankelovich Partners for *Time* magazine and CNN, only 28% of those surveyed on October 30 immediately after the market plunged said the drop made them "feel more worried about the country's economic future," while 66% said it did not. Ten years ago, the public was more apprehensive about the impact of the stock crash, when 46% of those surveyed in a *Time/CNN* poll said it made them "more worried" about the country's economic outlook, and 54% said it did not.

That kind of comfort level was also borne out in the exit polls from the 1997 off-year elections. In New Jersey, 63% of the voters declared the state's economy to be in good condition and 6% described it as excellent. In Virginia, 70% of the voters said the economy was in good shape and 17% termed it excellent.

Even if Republicans had a compelling and coherent vision of how they'd manage the economy differently from Clinton, the general level of confidence that the economy enjoys right now would probably have prevented them from using the fall in stock prices to score political points off Clinton, the way Democrats tried a decade ago.

The rebound in stock prices vindicated GOP restraint, but the Republican silence also underscored that fact that the party needs to develop a post-deficit economic agenda. That probably will be shaped in large part by the evolving discussion within the GOP on tax reform. Republicans are generally united when they talk about cutting and simplifying taxes. Right now, GOP lawmakers are debating the merits of a flat tax, a national sales tax, or perhaps, some hybrid of both.

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As a congressional party, it won't be easy for Republicans to come up with the right equation. They'll be pulled by special interests seeking exemptions and loopholes for whatever scheme they settle on. The nitty-gritty of deal-mak-

ing involved in any Congressional revision of the code will inevitably clutter the overall themes of reform that Republicans will want to convey to the public. For that reason, the debate probably won't be resolved until 2000 when the GOP settles on a presidential nominee who is better equipped to communicate and educate voters than congressional committee chairmen.

In the meantime, Republicans will need to eschew some of the Reagan-era rhetoric on tax cutting that worked well in the early 1980s. Tax cuts to starve the federal government will still sell to conservatives, but it could be counterproductive to Republicans seeking to reassure moderates that they don't want to simply shut down Washington.

Looking to the upcoming midterm elections, GOP pollster Steeper said, "We need to think about how we maximize turnout among conservatives, but we can't do it with a negative message like we did in 94." That year, 37% of the voters described themselves as conservatives. "But we were able to get conservatives to 36% in 1984, and we did that with positive excitement," noted Steeper.

By that time, even Reagan had modulated his tone on taxes, from cut them to reform them. He won 54% of the moderate vote; House Republican candidates won 43%.



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