



How Republicans win in the Northeast: A footnote

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Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (AP/Gregory Bull)

Let me add something in the nature of a footnote to Walter Olson's fine *Washington Examiner* opinion article on how Republicans win governorships in the Northeast. Olson rightly traces the pedigree of Northeastern Republican governors back to Thomas E. Dewey, whose extraordinary rise to national prominence in the 1930s came during his racket-busting record as (briefly in 1933) U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York and New York County (i.e., Manhattan) District Attorney de facto from 1935 and officially from 1938 to 1941.

So great was Dewey's fame that he was a leading contender at age 38 for the 1940 Republican presidential nomination; he was elected governor of New York, then the nation's largest state and the nation's dominant media center, by generous margins in 1942, 1946 and 1950. And of course, he was the Republican nominee for president in 1944 and 1948. As Olson points out, Dewey was the first of many Northeast Republican executives of similar ilk — Nelson Rockefeller and Rudy Giuliani in New York, Thomas Kean and Christine Todd Whitman in New Jersey, William Weld and Mitt Romney in Massachusetts.

Most of these Republicans were liberal on civil rights and many were big spenders — none moreso than Rockefeller, subject of Richard Norton Smith's recent definitive and compulsively readable biography *On His Own Terms*. Rockefeller was a Franklin Roosevelt appointee during World War II, as assistant secretary of state for Latin American Affairs, but when Roosevelt urged him to become a Democrat, he turned him down.

What attracted midcentury Northeast Republicans to their party? Better to ask what repelled them from becoming Democrats. I can think of three. (1) The influence of Southern segregationists in the Democratic Party. A majority or near-majority of Democrats in Congress were Southerners, almost all of them staunch backers of segregation. Dewey, Rockefeller, et al. didn't like that at all. (2) The dependence of Northern Democrats on private-sector unions, including many with ties to organized crime. These Republicans, many of them lawyers, identified with management and considered unions a drag on the economy and too often prone to violence. (3) Democrats' ties to organized crime. Going after organized crime was the basis of Dewey's early career and national fame, and Democratic ties to the rackets were deep. One of

the reasons Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver was shunned by national Democrats when he ran for president in 1952 and 1956 was not his (brave and creditworthy) refusal to strongly back racial segregation; no, it was his hearings on organized crime, which showed the ties of racketeer Frank Costello to important New York Democratic politicians.

These motives are, to varying degrees, irrelevant or transformed today. (1) There aren't any more Southern segregationists. (2) Private-sector unions are of dwindling influence, but the strong dependence of many Democratic on public-sector unions still motivates some aspiring politicians like to become Republicans — and some Democrats, like New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, to take on the teacher unions. (3) Organized crime is not what it used to be. But as the indictment last week of Sheldon Silver, speaker of the New York Assembly for 20 years, shows, there is still some entwinement of Northeast Democrats to criminal behavior. Though as Democrats will be happy to point out, Connecticut Republican Gov. John Rowland also went to jail.

Why have Northeastern electorates, so heavily Democratic in presidential and congressional elections, been willing to elect Republican governors so often? Because that's the only way to prevent their heavily Democratic legislatures from taxing and spending their states onto the road to bankruptcy for the benefit of the public employee unions. That's something that Thomas Dewey, a light spender unlike Rockefeller, would approve and understand.