



How the GOP wins in the northeast

By Walter Olson

Jan. 26, 2015

If the evening of Nov. 4 provided an electrifying moment for conservatives, it came when it emerged that Republicans were going to win tough races not just in states like Iowa and North Carolina — let's face it, winning states like those is no big deal in a strong GOP year — but also in some of the most passionately Democratic corners of the Northeast. Massachusetts, home of Harvard liberalism, where the share of voters who are registered Republicans stands at a frankly pathetic 11 percent, chose as its governor Charlie Baker, a businessman whose resume includes a stint at Boston's Pioneer Institute, a free-market think tank. Maryland, long known as a strongly Democratic state thanks in part to strong minority demographics and high rates of government employment, elected an unapologetic conservative of its own, businessman Larry Hogan.

This was a genuine feat for Republicans: With the possible exception of California, no major part of the country is as resistant to their message as the Northeast. Democratic White House candidates have swept the region's 11 states for the past six elections in a row, the only exception being Al Gore's narrow 2000 loss in New Hampshire. Only three of the region's 22 senators are Republicans, not much higher than the number of declared socialists (one). Democrats control most of the local legislatures, sometimes by margins that are almost comical, as in Massachusetts where they outnumber Republicans 34-6 in the upper house and 125-35 in the lower. Not a single Republican currently serves as an elected attorney general in the Northeast. If Baker and Hogan can win here, the thought goes, maybe the right kind of Republicans can win anywhere.

At the same time, not a few conservatives around TV sets in Dallas, Phoenix and Chantilly, Va., were feeling perhaps a bit of dread at the thought: Here come more Northeastern Republicans. Every conservative seems to know two things about Northeastern Republicans. One is that no matter how tough or hardcore they may seem, you invariably find in them a spot that's a bit ... squishy. Maybe they're tough as can be on tax cuts or crime; maybe there's nothing Establishment about them. But there will be some streak of environmentalism or internationalism, some disinclination to get into big fights over social issues, something borne of compromising with Democrats or caring too much about their good opinion. And that's squishy, right?

The other thing every conservative knows is that every second or third Northeastern Republican you run into on the street wants to run for president. That describes two of today's front-runners,

Mitt Romney and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, plus one from not long ago, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and one who actually served, George H.W. Bush. Soon after the November election, as if two Northeastern governors were not enough for primary voters to choose from, both former New York Gov. George Pataki and former Maryland Gov. Robert Ehrlich made it known that they, too, were available for Oval Office consideration. Although analyst Larry Sabato ranked Pataki and Ehrlich as “seventh tier” candidates, which sounds like something out of Dante, it seemed to confirm that Northeastern Republican governors were once again, in their own way, having a moment.

Let’s agree at once that the “squish” talk is unfair. (For one reason, GOP officials from every state in the union wimp out regularly on Republican principle, and yes, that includes Texas.) But there is something ideologically different about the Northeast. More of the elected Republicans are not social conservatives, and those who are tend to keep a low profile about it in their home campaigns; the big exception is former Sen. Rick Santorum, who left office after a decisive 59-41 dunking from Pennsylvania voters in 2006.

But it’s not just their ideologies that are different; it’s also their biographies. When these candidates come to national notice, it is usually by holding a single office, governor (you might throw in the governor-like post of New York City mayor, which would tend to confirm the rule). Both before and after serving as chief executives in government, they have trouble finding suitable positions in elected office. Their springboard to prominence often consists of holding jobs seen as nonpolitical, especially business person and prosecutor. Why these patterns, and what do they mean for their candidacies?

To find the true founder of Northeastern Republicanism, says political veteran and historian Al Felzenberg, you need to go back all the way to Thomas Dewey, who served three successful terms as governor in New York between 1943 and 1954. While these days Dewey is in danger of being remembered in the history books only as the “man who lost to Truman” in 1948, he was among the key political figures of his era, a massively successful prosecutor and corruption fighter — a theme that will recur — before tackling politics. As rival to Ohio’s Robert Taft, Dewey became known as the leader of the GOP’s Eastern Establishment wing, espousing a kind of centrist business conservatism that endorsed a larger role for government than the Taft people could stomach in areas like state aid to education, while still paying close attention to thrift and honesty in government, tax competitiveness and business climate.

Dewey opposed — unsuccessfully, in the end — the eventual realignment of the two national political parties along ideological lines, said Felzenberg, who has served in federal and state governments and whose books include a biography of former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean. Dewey’s view of a successful national party, Felzenberg says, was that it “needs some people who are out of step with the national party but in step with their states.” He was also among the first to articulate the distinction between national and state issues, and the opening thus given parties to differentiate their own appeal, so as to reach voters who might be ready to hear a Republican message at the state level but not yet at the national, or vice versa.

Deweyism, if you want to call it that, gave rise to many successors. The most visible for many years was the strain of liberal Republicanism represented by former New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. Rockefeller's followers threw out Dewey's fiscal conservatism — often they were happy to outspend the Democrats — and quarreled more bitterly and openly with the emergent Goldwater conservatives from the West and South. But as party realignment proceeded, this style of Republican liberalism lumbered toward extinction. Ambitious liberals correctly saw that their future lay in the Democratic Party, while GOP primary voters in the Northeast wanted candidates who were more recognizably conservative. As the once-numerous breed of truly liberal Republicans in the U.S. Senate passed from the scene — Jacob Javits of New York, Clifford Case of New Jersey, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, Lowell Weicker of Connecticut — none took their places.

Yet Dewey had purposely made his grand political organization big enough to house many types of Republican. Less often reported is that Dewey youth activism also gave a start to such figures as F. Clifton White and William Rusher, key organizers of Goldwater Republicanism and the modern conservative movement.

It also spun off what might be termed a prosecutorial tradition, in which busting corruption in big cities served as a qualification for high political office. When William Weld ran for governor of Massachusetts in 1990, his track record included a five-year stint as lead federal prosecutor for the state, with a big emphasis on public corruption that resulted in numerous convictions and guilty pleas at Boston's City Hall. Weld had been recommended for the U.S. attorney position by an up-and-coming young lawyer in the Reagan administration named Rudy Giuliani and in turn became Giuliani's superior when the administration called Weld to Washington to head the Justice Department's criminal division.

Giuliani himself by then had won national fame by indicting the heads of the five organized crime families of New York as a U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, and he went on to be elected mayor of New York City in 1993, serving for two terms. A few years later, between 2002 and 2008, U.S. Attorney Chris Christie took down dozens of New Jersey officials of both parties in corruption investigations, including state senators and county executives. The next year, he was elected governor.

The corruption for which many Northeastern cities are known gives prosecutors an opening. Even when the players are totally clean, however, the political style among Northeastern Democrats tends to reward going along to get along. The best way to achieve higher office is to put in time holding lower office, with glad-handing elected jobs preferred. Being an incumbent can shade into a lifelong career. The candidates this system produces can come across as tired: In waiting their turn on the inside and not making waves, they've bought into all the little existing arrangements.

Some successful Northeastern Republicans do come up through retail politics; Pataki, for example, started as mayor of Peekskill and state legislator. But an outsider stance often works at least as well. Wall Streeter and business executive Lewis Lehrman self-financed a campaign in 1982 and came from obscurity to within two points of knocking off Mario Cuomo. Mitt Romney may now be seen as Establishment with a capital E, but in 2002, fresh off his Olympics success, he rode into state politics in a classic insurgency campaign. If Democratic nominee Shannon O'Brien got elected, he charged, she would govern behind closed doors with the senate president and speaker of the house as a cozy Beacon Hill "gang of three." It worked. "People wanted a check and balance," says Charley Manning, a longtime GOP consultant in Massachusetts.

In truth, many of these outsider figures, while not holding actual elective office, had long been active in politics or government service. Romney, like several others, had grown up in a political family, Christie had tried unsuccessfully to win office in Morris County, Charlie Baker and Larry Hogan had served in earlier state administrations, and so forth. But it's the virtue of necessity: When you live in a place where it's hard for you to get elected in the first place, at least you can offer the appeal of a new broom.

Besides an independent position outside the gridlock of interest-group dealings, Northeastern Republicans running for governor typically appeal to competence. If a snowstorm shuts the highways, if a natural disaster means calling out the National Guard, wouldn't you rather have a tough-minded businessman in charge? Curiously (or maybe not), both Charlie Baker and Larry Hogan last year were given huge openings by exactly the same failings of competence on the part of Democratic administrations in their states, namely the botched launch of Obamacare enrollment plans that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and came out unusable. Other fiascoes included a crime lab scandal and failures at the state children's agency in Massachusetts, and the Baltimore jail scandal in Maryland. It was the perfect opportunity for both Baker, who in private life had turned around the large Harvard Pilgrim health organization, and Hogan to emerge as the adult in the room.

Baker was known as not much of a social conservative to begin with, while Hogan's handling of the issue was crucial to his success. Shortly after the Republican primary, he announced that he considered social issues off the table as far as new legislation was concerned, as was gay marriage ("The voters of Maryland have already decided this issue.").

Democrats then spent much of the campaign trying to draw him back into these controversies, trying to pin him down on whether he disliked the state's new gun-control law or would try to change laws on women's health. Hogan declined to play, noting that these weren't issues he was campaigning on and promptly turning the discussion back to the state's business climate and the many tax hikes the incumbent Democrats had put through. (The Baltimore Sun did not endorse Hogan, but conceded the effectiveness of his "laser-like focus on matters of taxes and spending.") When Democrats insisted he take a stand on the Supreme Court's Hobby Lobby decision, Hogan cheerfully explained that it "doesn't have anything to do with being Maryland governor," not the answer they wanted to hear.

Besides neutralizing the social issues, almost everything else had to go right for Hogan, and it did. Unlike Baker, who had the resources to match and indeed beat the war chest of opponent Martha Coakley, Hogan knew he would be drastically outspent, most outside donors having written off the race as unwinnable, and he took advantage of the state's rarely-used public financing option.

The results confirmed that something new was going on in Maryland. (I pretend to no objectivity about Hogan's win, having been a volunteer in his campaign.) Democrats managed to get decent turnout from black voters for candidate Anthony Brown, who would have been the state's first African-American governor, but turnout collapsed in liberal Montgomery County. Meanwhile, Hogan not only swept many blue-collar Baltimore suburbs with a history of often voting for Democrats, but also managed to win affluent Howard County, which Obama had carried by more than 20 points over Mitt Romney two years earlier.

According to news station WBAL, "some see Hogan's win as the biggest upset in the country," a boast that seems not unreasonable given the numbers involved. Ad spending wound up breaking more than 2-to-1 against Hogan — buys by both parties' governors associations helped make it less lopsided — while direct spending favored Brown 4 to 1. Perhaps the most astonishing figure, again from WBAL: Hogan had an average of 16 staffers on his payroll, Brown 207. It didn't save him.

For Republicans in these states, winning office is only the first challenge. "Most of them get elected due to utter disgust or anger with the Democrats, not because their state's citizens truly want Republican principles," observes Suzanne Israel Tufts, an attorney and campaign veteran in New York. Then the conflicts begin: "Being a strong leader means sticking with their principles, but often that and representing their electorate pull in two different directions," Tufts says.

To be sure, most do enjoy a genuine honeymoon period. "Republican governors in the Northeast have tended, maybe more than your typical governor, to have a lot of success in their first year and then backslide," notes Dan McLaughlin, an attorney and editor at RedState. The word backsliding often comes up in connection with the 12-year service of New York's George Pataki, who scored a string of accomplishments — fiscal upgrades, tough-on-crime legislation, a turnaround of the once-remedial City University of New York — but at length got regularly outmaneuvered by his legislature, which did not share his conflict-avoidant disposition. Connecticut's Jodi Rell, like Pataki a champion at the polls, was widely liked personally but proved no match for her state's high-spending legislature.

These governors need to pick their battles, and many of their victories come by picking issues such as education reform, on which Democrats may themselves be divided. Their role in budgeting is often a key — many have line-item vetoes or other relatively strong fiscal powers. William Weld in Massachusetts used a fiscal crunch as the occasion for a meaningful welfare

reform that is still remembered today, explaining, “We want to make the safety net a trampoline as opposed to a hammock.”

Even with the occasional disappointing exception, these governors generally deliver on the promise of curbing taxes and spending in comparison to their local Democratic counterparts. The Cato Institute, with which I’m affiliated, issues a report card every two years rating the nation’s governors on their success in holding down spending and tax burdens. Over the past 18 years (1996-2014), Northeastern Republican governors have cumulatively gotten scores of A, B or C 39 times, and D or F only 7 times. Their regional Democratic counterparts, on the other hand, have scored A, B or C 17 times, and D or F a miserable 36 times.

And some triumphs happen just because someone with the right instincts was in the right place at the right time. Northwestern law professor and Federalist Society member John McGinnis says Pataki’s “most impressive act” was one that was hardly noticed at the time and yielded no electoral benefits, namely his appointment to the state’s highest court of Robert Smith, who “became one of the great state court jurists of his time.”

For the most part, the Republican governors also escape serious corruption scandals. (Connecticut’s John Rowland was a painful exception.) The less readily defined phenomenon of patronage and cronyism is harder both to measure and to guard against, especially in a political environment that regularly requires cutting deals across party lines. Christie has stirred national press attention by his close alliance with South Jersey figure George Norcross III, routinely described as the state’s most important Democratic boss. Even Bill Weld in Massachusetts, as immaculate as they come, spent years facing off against wily State Senate President William Bulger, a patronage king who had so succeeded in stuffing the MBTA payroll with his pals that it was nicknamed “Mr. Bulger’s Transit Administration.” Weld blinked, or so his critics say, and finally got Bulger out of the legislature by making him president of the state university.

Unlike Tom Dewey, as one observer notes, modern GOP governors in liberal states “don’t leave much behind” by way of organization. Winning office often requires them to keep a certain distance from a party less popular than they are, which is one reason they often start out having strained relations with major officeholders or activists within their own party (in a notorious slight, Giuliani actually endorsed Mario Cuomo over George Pataki).

Jumping to the U.S. Senate, a common career move for governors, basically never works for Republicans in the Northeast because Democrats long since learned to nationalize federal races there. So while almost every successful GOP governor gets quoted in the press talking up a possible race for Senate, hardly any of them follow through. One who did was Weld, who challenged incumbent Democrat John Kerry in 1996 and, though wildly popular as governor, lost badly.

With no obvious place to go in state politics, it’s less surprising that Northeastern Republicans so often quit the statehouse for jobs out of town. Weld quit in the middle of his second term to take

an ambassadorial appointment that didn't work out, and his successor, Paul Cellucci, did the same, quitting midterm to become ambassador to Canada. Christine Whitman quit the New Jersey governorship to become administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under President George W. Bush. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, after winning landslide re-election, left midterm to become the first director of Homeland Security.

Which may shed light on why so many of these Republicans run for president: Unless someone happens to offer them a cabinet seat, where else are they supposed to go? And yet nearly always in doing so, like a diver coming up to the surface and getting the bends, they are pained by the need to explain, adjust or forget the positions that worked so well for them under the different pressures of the Northeast.

Are they dissimulating and just saying what they think conservatives in Iowa want to hear? Or, freed at last from the need to represent constituents in Cambridge, Brooklyn and Fort Lee, are they finally letting their real views come through? And either way, are they setting themselves up, in an age of YouTube, for endless teasing at the hands of rivals documenting how their utterances have changed?

Odds are good that over the next couple of years we'll have some chances to find out.

*Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. His books include *The Litigation Explosion* and *Schools for Misrule*.*