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Convention puts spotlight on GOP governors

Valerie Richardson | August 28, 2012

TAMPA, Fla. — With Democrats ruling Washington, Republican governors have become their party's standard-bearers, raising their profiles with their tax-cutting, budget-balancing and hurricane-battling derring-do.

The gubernatorial rock stars took center stage Tuesday at the Republican National Convention, drawing cheers from a partisan crowd eager to hear their message of fearlessness in the face of a daunting economic downturn.

"Conservative fiscal policies are working, and so are more Americans in states with Republican governors," Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell told the cheering audience. "Now, just think what we can do if we had a president who would support us, not obstruct us."

Mr. McDonnell focused his remarks on fiscal responsibility, the No. 1 issue of the new wave of Republican chief executives, drawing a contrast between GOP governors who routinely balance their budgets and a Democratic president who hasn't pushed through a federal budget in three years.

The next president should be "someone who has created jobs in the private sector, who understands the economy and who has actually balanced a budget — or, heck, for that matter, who has actually passed a budget," said Mr. McDonnell. "We need President Mitt Romney."

Chris Edwards, who compiles the Governors' Fiscal Policy Report Card for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, said Republican governors tend to be more tightfisted than their Democratic counterparts, but the difference has become especially striking.

"This year, the gap is even larger. These Republican governors, and there's a large group of them, are all economic conservatives," said Mr. Edwards. "On the other hand, there are fewer fiscally conservative Democrats than in the past."

Twenty-nine states have Republican governors, and 21 of them were elected in 2010 or 2011.

"They're a unique group. They're doing things like tax cuts, pension reform, but they're also starting to take on business-tax reform, and that is something we haven't seen in the past," Mr. Edwards said.

A half-dozen of those GOP governors took to the stage Tuesday at the Tampa Bay Times Forum. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie delivered the keynote address, and Ohio's John Kasich, Oklahoma's Mary Fallin, Wisconsin's Scott Walker, Nevada's Brian Sandoval and South Carolina's Nikki Haley gave speeches in prime time.

Mr. Walker and Jan Brewer of Arizona received loud and sustained applause as they announced their state-delegate votes. Mr. Walker fought off a recall effort mounted by labor unions this year, and Mrs. Brewer has taken the lead in challenging President Obama's policies on illegal immigration.

Absent were Republican governors from the Gulf Coast, including Louisiana's Bobby Jindal, Mississippi's Phil Bryant and Florida's Rick Scott, who canceled scheduled appearances in order to grapple with the impact of Hurricane Isaac.

Delegates heard stories of how the governors revived their state economies with pension reform and spending cuts. Mrs. Fallin said Oklahoma had a \$5 billion deficit when she took office in 2011. Today, she said, the state has \$500,000 in its rainy-day fund.

"That's an example of the kind of switch you can make with the right kinds of policies," Mrs. Fallin said.

At a news conference Tuesday, Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, poked holes in the Republican governors' reputation for fiscal competence. He called Mr. Christie "a governor who has the fourth-worst unemployment rate of any state in the nation."

Mike Schrimpf, spokesman for the Republican Governors Association, called Mr. O'Malley's comment "pretty ironic," given Maryland's 7 percent unemployment rate, compared with 5.9 percent for neighboring Virginia.

"I think the frustration for Gov. O'Malley is his big-government approach isn't working, so the only thing he knows how to do is attack," Mr. Schrimpf said.

Another Democrat, former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, sent out a tweet Sunday saying, "R convention delay due to Isaac: I guess God has ways to shut that whole thing down."