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The GOP Joy Divisions

By David Weigel

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The offices of Americans for Tax Reform were cleared out and spruced up. Tuxedoed waiters put out plates of food and placards that offered special cocktails, like the Brownback Derby (bourbon and ginger ale) and the Lois Lerner (“We don’t have it.”) Mementos from the career of ATR’s president, Grover Norquist, were left on the shelves—a New York Post cover commemorating George H.W. Bush’s broken tax pledge, several sets of Soviet nesting dolls.

Revelry was set to begin at 7 p.m., when the first polls closed in Kentucky and Virginia. [Peter Roff](#), a burly conservative columnist and think-tanker-about-town, sat across from Lisa Nelson, the CEO of the American Legislative Exchange Council. They assumed the standard Washington, D.C. pose, and checked their phones. Boom: There were the exits polls, as good as they’d heard.

“North Carolina even,” said Nelson. “[Pat] Roberts up 2. [Cory] Gardner up 4.”

“The good news for Republicans is that they’ve won. The bad news is that they’ve won.”

James O’Keefe, Republican activist

“Ed Gillespie down 1,” said Roff, referring to the former RNC chairman who’d run a thankless race against Virginia Senator Mark Warner. “Gillespie’s in the hunt. We’ve got a wave.”

In another room, a TV tuned to MSNBC was reporting the call that would set the night’s tone. Senator Mitch McConnell, who had usually been well-liked in this part of Washington, had beaten his Democratic challenger more decisively than any poll had suggested he could. Most of the TVs at the party were turned to local Fox affiliates—the large room where Norquist held weekly meetings for conservatives to talk through their agendas was festooned with flatscreens. Yet the MSNBC screen had the best placement, unmissable between a bar and an elevator.

“We put that on because, come 9 or 9:30, people are going to want to see the MSNBC hosts cry,” said Paul Blair, ATR’s state government affairs director.

Norquist’s group had held a election party in 2012, too. The MSNBC feed hadn’t gone over as well. But this was a different night. As dozens of activists and lobbyists and movement types filled the office, the mood ranged from controlled glee to unburdened glee. McConnell’s win was nice, but Warner’s inability to put away Gillespie quickly vanquished worry that the Democrats might have outperformed the polls. By 8 p.m., most conversation was about whether to split and head to a Gillespie party, or about how the Republican Senate would govern.

The second conversation was the tough one. It was clear to anyone who spent his life trying to bend the conservative movement his way that there would be a battle for credit. When West Virginia fell to Representative Shelley Moore Capito, a Senate candidate who had never gone in with the Tea Party, I found a follower of Ayn Rand at the snack table.

“As soon as they win, the splits in the Republican Party are going to widen again,” said Ed Hudgins, the mustachioed director of advocacy at the Randian Atlas Society. “There are voters that they can’t read out to, who are all about business. I like to say that they have the values of a Howard Roark, but they don’t have the politics yet of a John Galt. They’re socially liberal, they look at the GOP, and they see Rick Santorum and Mike Huckabee and say ‘I want nothing to do with that.’”

The wins mounted, and the Democrats started looking weaker. Pat Michaels, the resident [climate science skeptic](#) at the libertarian Cato Institute, looked intently at a screen that was counting up the results of Florida’s race for governor. “If Charlie Crist wins, Tom Steyer is going to claim credit,” he said. Steyer, an environmentalist billionaire, had spent more than [\\$6 million on ads](#) to aid the Republican-turned-independent-turned-Democratic candidate for governor. “If Scott wins, it will absolutely prove that no amount of money can make people care about ‘climate’ as an election issue.”

That pleased Michaels, and Scott seemed to be winning, but he worried about what a Republican Senate could actually do when it came to blocking Obama’s regulations, his EPA. Matthew Vadum, the author of *Subversion, Inc.* (subtitle: “How Obama’s ACORN Red Shirts are Still Terrorizing and Ripping Off American Taxpayers”), had the same set of worries. What were Republicans actually ready to do to, say, stop the president from enacting immigration amnesty by executive order?

“They could take away funding for the DHS to process the forms, I guess,” said Vadum. “Obama could grant a temporary stay for immigrants, and leave the rest up to a future president, but that’s not his style. Republicans have already given away all the tools they have for challenging him. They didn’t sue. They won’t impeach him.” Vadum picked up one of the pigs-in-a-blanket paid for by the anti-tax group and its sponsors. “Good victuals this year.”

Republicans kept winning; I kept bumping into the conservatives who worried about the message that would send. I’d hardly said a word to [Daniel McCarthy](#), editor of the anti-war American Conservative magazine, when a great cheer and exchange of high-fives burst forth behind him.

“Tom Cotton just won in Arkansas,” said McCarthy with a sigh. “That was one of the races I didn’t want the Republicans to win. Cotton’s going to join the McCain/Graham caucus as soon as he gets there. And it’s worse, because he’s young, and he’s going to be out front and around for years.”

By this point, I’d managed to find the only people at the party who weren’t refilling their cups or bumping chests. This was when I saw James O’Keefe, the mastermind of a never-ending series of hidden camera liberal exposes, entering the party with Shaun McCutcheon, the Alabama businessman who’d won a Supreme Court case that lifted caps on donations to political parties.

O’Keefe and McCutcheon had flown to D.C. on whims, and rented a stretch limo to cruise from party to party to party.

Here were two of the men who had decisively helped Republicans win the election. O’Keefe and his Project Veritas Action reporters had baited and reeled in Democrats every few weeks. In Arkansas, they got allies of Senator Mark Pryor (the guy who lost to Cotton) to insist the Democrat was lying about his gay marriage stance. In Kentucky, they got fans of McConnell’s opponent to say she was lying about her love of coal mines. In Colorado and North Carolina, O’Keefe stings had caught pro-Democrat activists musing about how to fill out unused absentee ballots and how to vote even if you lacked American citizenship. McCutcheon, by his own estimate, helped Republicans direct “millions more dollars” into their parties and their candidates.

“I feel good about a lot more money being raised and spent,” said McCutcheon. He reminded me that he’d actually spent Kentucky’s primary night at Mitch McConnell’s victory party, on the leader’s invitation. “I’ve met with McConnell many times. He’s a real campaign finance guru.”

O’Keefe and McCutcheon waded into the party, with the citizen journalist getting more double-takes than the financier. When they left, I climbed into the limo, which was pointed toward the official bash put on by the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

“I haven’t had time to check the results apart from Kentucky,” said O’Keefe. “Did our video make a difference there? I think it might have. I know that the pro-marriage group that went on the air in Arkansas used footage from our Pryor video.”

As the limo rolled, O’Keefe ticked off the ways that “national media” had dismissed his videos. Local press had shown up to cover them. The national Republican Party didn’t embrace his videos, but the conservative media did.

“You know the quote that Rush Limbaugh uses, that the left likes to circle the wagons and the left likes to circle the firing squad?” asked O’Keefe. “The good news for Republicans is that they’ve won. The bad news is that *they’ve won*. They don’t know what to do when they’re in power. Those ACORN videos injected a shot of adrenaline into the Republican Party, and they don’t know what they’re doing.”

The limo pulled up to Union Station, where Republicans had rented a grand, two-tiered ballroom with an IMAX-sized TV playing Fox News. It took a surprising amount of wrangling for O’Keefe to get one of the armbands that guaranteed entry.

“This is the guy who won the Senate for Republicans,” said one of the people who’d joined O’Keefe for the election party tour.

“That’s great, but you need an armband to get in,” said a clipboard-clasping assistant.

O’Keefe got in. So did McCutcheon and the entourage. They entered a new reality where the Republican enthusiasm was clear and pure and unaltered by anything like fear of ideological

purity. It was after 10 p.m., and the numbers on Fox News's screens started adding up to sure wins. Kansas Senator Jerry Moran, the chairman of the NRSC, entered the party after the race in his home state was called for his colleague Pat Roberts. He was engulfed by huggers, then he disappeared, as throngs of staffers and lobbyists waited for the inevitable.

It came soon enough. As a bar band played Tom Petty's "American Girl," Fox News called the Iowa Senate race for Joni Ernst, the first woman to win any federal election in that state. Moran took the stage in front of the band, and started talking about what a great day for America it had been, before he was drowned out—Fox News had called North Carolina for Thom Tillis, the speaker of the state House who had struggled all year.

The anxiety of a few hours early, the looming fear of party fissures, faded right away. Victory had canceled it. After Moran left the stage, I found O'Keefe et al in the lounge where NRSC brass had been beaming about the six—no, seven, then eight—races that broke their way.

"North Carolina was decided by the smallest of margins," said O'Keefe. "Our video could have been the tipping point."