

The Big Question: Election Day lessons?

By Sydelle Moore and Tony Romm - 11/04/09 10:11 AM ET

Some of the nation's top political commentators, legislators and intellectuals offer some insight into the biggest question burning up the blogosphere today.

Today's question:

What did we learn from Election Day?

Michelle D. Bernard, president & CEO of the [Independent Women's Forum](#), said:

The election last night wasn't a referendum on President Obama, but it certainly shows that 2008 wasn't a permanent political realignment. We learned that President Obama's popularity doesn't carry over to every member of his party, and Republicans who run smart campaigns and focus on the issues people care about can not just beat, but can trounce, Democrats in swing states.

Political analysts will comb through the polling and exit data to assess what groups swung the furthest from the Democrat to the Republican column, but it is clear that many of those who had supported President Obama are not happy with how Washington is working today and are ready to punish candidates who are following his lead.

This will have effects not just on next year's election, but on the decisions that Representatives have to make today. Wise conservative and moderate Democrats should consider listening more to their constituents, instead of liberal Congressional leaders. Especially on the hot-button issue of health care, they will find that many—including many self-identified Democrats and Independents—don't agree with the direction Democrats are heading.

Take this [recent poll](#) by the Independent Women's Forum on women's attitudes toward health care reform. Only 16 percent of women surveyed think health care should be Congress's top priority, just 10 percent are comfortable with a trillion dollar price tag, and 75 percent want little or no change to their own health care.

Are Members of Congress paying attention? They should, because voters certainly are.

John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at [The Cato Institute](#), said:

We learned that independents can switch their votes from Democrats to Republicans when they don't like the political status quo. What lesson will be drawn from that fact by Democratic members of the House who represent districts won by McCain or Bush? I suspect they will conclude that supporting Obama's agenda, especially on health care, has become a much greater danger to their chances of re-election in 2010.

John M. Snyder, Public Affairs Director of the [Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms](#), said:

The populist rollback of Obama and extreme leftism has begun. In both Virginia and New Jersey, independents apparently voted in sufficient numbers to turn away or turn out the proponents of ever-expanding government programs.

Grover Norquist, executive director of [Americans for Tax Reform](#), said:

Conservatives cannot win without the Republican party and the Republican party cannot win without conservatives. Everything else is commentary.

Michael T. McPhearson, executive director of [Veterans for Peace](#), said:

I lived in New Jersey and have many friends there, so I know that

Christie's win is more about local politics than national. I am not as familiar with Virginia, but I believe the same is true for the Governor's race there. However, the loss by Republicans in upstate New York certainly has national implications. It is clear that there is a struggle within the Republican Party. With national Republican voices like Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh involved the party made the race have national significance.

The Democrats should be concerned because there is great concern over the deficit and the economy and an underlying anxiety over the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but Republicans have structural problems they need to deal with. The cracks in their coalition are huge. They better learn from the race in upstate NY or they will deepen their status as the minority party.

Rob Richie, executive director of [FairVote](#), said:

We learned yesterday that President Obama's coattails are no stronger in off-year gubernatorial elections than they were for earning Chicago the summer Olympics in 2016. But just as that disappointment in Copenhagen has no bearing on the potential fortunes of Democrats in 2010 and 2012, neither do the results in New Jersey and Virginia. They simply mean that majorities in those states wanted a local change of direction. The fact of Republican governors in Vermont and Rhode Island and Democratic governors in Wyoming and Oklahoma doesn't mean those states will follow the party of those states' governors in the 2012 presidential elections either.

The Republican defeat in the 23rd congressional race in fact may be more telling. Conservative grassroots anger did not translate into a victory, and Republicans have a grand total of two House seats in all of New York and New England, down from 20 in 1994. That does not bode well for their version of a 50-state strategy in 2010 and 2012.

Larry Sabato, director of the [Center for Politics](#), said:

The Republicans learned they can win again (VA, NJ), but only if they can unify their warring factions (NY-23). The Democrats learned they have a different kind of base problem. They have a year to figure out how to get more of their base activists to the polls in a year when President Obama won't be on the ballot.

John F. McManus, president of [The John Birch Society](#), said:

One conclusion that can be drawn from the 2009 election results is that the momentum has swung back again to basic principles that made our nation great — less government, traditional values, and individuals taking care of themselves. Our country didn't become the envy of the world because of what government did. No, it became great because of what government was prevented from doing! We have a steep mountain to climb in order to have this fundamental notion restored to the minds and hearts of our people. But the shift away from government doing everything seems to have gained some needed steam on November 3rd. My prayer is that it will continue.

Glenn Reynolds of [Instapundit](#) said:

There are two big lessons from yesterday's elections. The first is that, as I've suggested elsewhere, [Obama's magic has faded](#). Were he still the powerful figure of last year, these elections wouldn't have been close. As it is, Virginia and New Jersey weren't especially close at all, and the only election where a Democrat won was one where there was no Republican in the race — and the only one where Obama himself didn't pay a visit. This doesn't mean that Obama is a drag on Democrats necessarily, but it does indicate that he can't save one who's in trouble with his own voters, which is something that Blue Dogs are sure to take notice of.

The other lesson is for the GOP Establishment, which would have held onto NY-23 had it picked a better candidate, instead of inspiring a grassroots revolt by choosing the distinctly un-Republican Dede Scozzafava, who was forced to withdraw by a nationwide outcry. Newt Gingrich seriously damaged his already quixotic hopes for a 2012 role by siding with Scozzafava against the base, and the national GOP showed itself to have miscalculated severely on this race. For a brand to flourish, it has to mean something. As such lessons go, this was a cheap one — if they're bright enough to learn from it.

Dean Baker, co-director for the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#), said:

The message is that it is still the economy, stupid. People are hurting and they blame the party in power. While this meant the Dems took a hit in New Jersey and Virginia, the New York mayoral race was ridiculously close given Bloomberg's advantage as the incumbent and his enormous lead in campaign spending.

If the Democrats don't produce jobs by November 2010, they will pay a price in the off-year elections. No one other than the Washington Post and a few elite pundits give damn about the budget deficit. In fact, almost no one even has a clear as to how large it is. If it doubled or were cut in half almost no one would even notice — it would still be a really large number. If the the Democrats want to win they have to ignore the pundits (remember, pundits don't get their jobs by being competent and don't lose them by being incompetent) and figure out a way to generate jobs it's that simple.

Germany has managed to keep its unemployment rate at 7.6 percent. That did it through a policy of work-sharing, the government effectively uses unemployment benefits to keep people employed working short-hours at pretty much the same pay, instead of paying people to be unemployed.

I don't think Germans are that much smarter than we are. We can learn from this policy and get unemployment back to more normal levels quickly. If the Democrats don't move on this quickly, they will suffer next fall.