

The Big Question: What is the national impact of today's elections?

By Maryann Dreas, Sydelle Moore and Tony Romm - 11/03/09 08:58 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:

As Election Day unfolds, what should we look for to understand the national impact of these races? Are any of today's elections a referendum on Obama?

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

Whatever their outcomes, the elections today in Virginia, New York, and New Jersey reflect poorly on the Obama administration. One year ago, Obama won Virginia convincingly. Now all Democrats running statewide seem likely to lose, perhaps by large margins. Democratic governor Jon Corzine may pull through in New Jersey, but the fact that he might lose in such a heavily blue state suggests how far public sentiment has swung against his party and its national leader. The New York election tells us less about national party trends than about struggles within the GOP. Still, a conservative Republican victory in upstate New York would suggest Democratic weakness rather than strength.

Other signs agree with the portents of these elections. Obama's [job approval](#) dropped more in the third quarter of 2009 than it had for any other president over the last half century. A solid majority of Americans believe the nation is "[on the wrong track](#)." Support in public opinion for Democrats in Congress [has dropped steeply](#).

All in all, the evidence suggests the Obama administration might be on the same path that led the Clinton presidency to the election of 1994. But there is an important difference: In 1994, the public had some faith in the alternative to Clinton and the Democrats in Congress. In 2009, the public still has doubts about the Republican alternative to Pelosi and Obama. Those doubts came from the failings of the Bush administration. Until the Republicans reject the ideas that led to those failings – Big Government at home and crusades for democracy abroad – they will remain a second best alternative to Democrats that the public distrusts.

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

Of course! Just as occurs after every new president takes office, the results of the November 4, 2009 elections will provide an indication of voter opinion about the type of leadership the nation is being given. The very fact that Mr. Obama injected himself into the two races for governor, and sent Vice President Biden to upstate New York to influence that congressional race, means that the current administration's performance should indeed be judged. Without knowing the election results at this moment, but looking at the president's declining poll numbers, it begins to look like an endorsement from Obama/Biden will produce a negative, not a positive, reaction from many voters for the candidates they support. This is good for America.

Sen. John Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.) said:

No, they're just elections. All the TV people are saying this will be a big thing for President Obama, but what it is really is candidate versus candidate. [There is] not really any impact for Obama. It's just a couple governor's races, a couple House races.

Sen. Ben Nelson (D-Neb.) said:

They are local races. If I'm on the other side and I want to really stir things up, then I would try to call this a national referendum. But I don't see it that way at all. You can take a look at the national polls, and that shows the status of Obama or his policies, but these elections won't have anything to say about that.

Herb London, president of the [Hudson Institute](#), said:

This Election Day is in some sense a litmus test for the Obama administration. The gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia are central in this analysis because the president has been an active participant in both cases. In a sense, President Barack Obama has some ownership in these races, a fact demonstrated by the president's active campaigning for New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine.

Should Republicans win in these races, the president will deny the result as a referendum on his policies. But since he is on the campaign stump for these Democrats, his denial will certainly appear hollow.

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

Obama said one thing when he ran for office in 2008. He has governed in a very different way. The demonstrations on April 15, July 4, the August revolt and the September 12 rallies and the plummeting approval by registered independents were one sign that the swing vote in America feels misled. How will actual voters register?

Let us compare the Obama vote in 2008 in Virginia and New Jersey with the Democrat vote in 2009. Are voters as excited by the Obama reality as the Obama promise?

Then calculate the falloff in the Democrat vote and take a look at the 49 Democrat congressmen in districts that voted for McCain — how will they stand in 2010 if they suffer the same falloff?

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

The only referendum on an incumbent president is his reelection race. Just like all of his predecessors, Obama is not on the ballot in the off year. But is Obama a factor today? Of course. Opposition to his policies is partly responsible for the large mobilization of Republicans in this election. Last year's electorate was large and disproportionately Democratic. This year's is smaller and disproportionately Republican. Enthusiasm matters a great deal in politics, and presidents can generate it for either side, depending on the year and circumstances.

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

The hard numbers show that a state's recent elections for governor and president are nearly irrelevant for predicting upcoming federal elections -- and vice versa. Most of our heavily blue and red presidential states are represented by governors from the minority party, for example, and voters in a state are far more inclined to change parties in gubernatorial races than shift their vote for president. In fact, while one party's presidential candidates have carried 40 of our nation's 50 states in all three elections in the past decade, only 15 states in that period have elected governors of just one party.

Given that politics really does seem to be local in governor's races, the elections today in New Jersey and Virginia will tell us one thing: who will be the next governor of those states. The 2010 and 2012 elections will have to wait.

Read more at [The Huffington Post](#).

Glenn Reynolds of [Instapundit](#), said:

All politics is local. Creigh Deeds's slump owes less to Obama's increasing unpopularity in Virginia than to Deeds's failure to talk about issues Virginians care about. Corzine's problems aren't so much a reflection on Obama as a reflection on how Corzine's tax-and-spend policies have damaged New Jersey, turning what should have been an easy race into a toss-up. And the big news in N.Y.-23 is the departure of nominal-Republican Dede Scozzafava.

That said, though, it's easy to see which candidate is the Obama candidate in these races, and they're all having a tougher time than they should, given Obama's overwhelming popularity just a few months ago. That these races are even close is a sign that the Obama magic has faded; how they go will tell us just how far.