



## Fall 2009 U.S. Election

One year before the mid-term Congressional elections, state and local level [elections](#) were held across the United States. The races in Virginia, New Jersey and New York have attracted attention as possible indicators of national trends.

The two gubernatorial elections, in Virginia and in New Jersey, always take place just one year after the presidential elections. In New York's 23<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District a special election was necessary to replace Republican Congressman John McHugh, who was appointed by President Obama to become U.S. Secretary of the Army.

In Virginia, Republican Bob McDonnell defeated Democrat R. Creigh Deeds and in New Jersey, Republican Chris Christie won against incumbent Democrat John Corzine. Yet in New York, following a noteworthy Republican in-party clash, Bill Owens has become the first Democratic Congressman to represent the 23<sup>rd</sup> District since 1872.

There was a flurry of post-election analysis: are the Republicans resurgent – or divided? What about the role of Republican heavyweights like Sarah Palin? Which way are the independents turning? Was it all about the economy? Mistrust of the left? Return to conservatism? Did some candidates simply run a better campaign than others?

Few politicians see these elections as evidence of any judgment on President Obama as of yet. Historical evidence shows that one cannot predict the outcome of the next mid-term Congressional elections simply by looking at the results of the previous gubernatorial races. Yet the success of Republican candidates who emphasized a moderate, pragmatic approach to local problems while downplaying their socially conservative views drives home to Democrats that

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they can lose uninspired independents to more exciting or populist Republican candidates in a time when jobs mean more than “social values”.

In **Virginia**’s gubernatorial election, campaign styles proved to be key. While Virginia voted “blue” – i.e. Democratic – in last year’s presidential election, it is still a [stronghold](#) of more conservative rural voters who identify variously as “Independent”, “Southern Democrat”, “Conservative” or “Republican” depending on which issues one focuses on. Republican Bob McDonnell focused his [positive](#) message mainly on jobs and the economy. His Democratic rival Deeds tried to direct attention to McDonnell’s socially conservative views, but failed to gain voters through this strategy. As is often the case, independent voters played a key role in swinging the vote – that is, those who showed up to vote. The numbers of voters were, predictably, much lower than the turnout for last year’s Virginia election that helped boost Obama’s victory.

In **New Jersey**, a Democratic [“blue” state turned Republican “red”](#) as districts that had voted for Obama last year now overwhelmingly voted for Republican gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie. In a race that seemed largely un-ideological, voters took out their dissatisfaction with the [economy](#) in general and with Governor Corzine by replacing him. Yet President Obama’s [approval rating](#) among voters in New Jersey is still as high as the percentage of votes he received in 2008 (57%).

The **New York** special Congressional election was affected by a new group of super-conservative activists, some even from out-of-state, dubbed by one *Washington Post* columnist as [“Palinists”](#). They pushed for Conservative candidate Doug Hoffman as an alternative to Dede Scozzafava, the official Republican candidate, who was considered “too moderate” in her political views and criticized for her willingness to work with the Obama administration. Some Conservatives even dubbed Scozzafava a [“RINO”](#) (“Republican In Name Only”). Just a few days before the election, Scozzafava dropped out, encouraging voters to back the Democratic candidate Bill Owens. Though the vote was extremely close, with Hoffman garnering [46% of the vote](#), enough moderate voters cast their ballots for Owens, cementing the Democratic victory.

For many observers, the key story in the 2009 election was not the repudiation of President Obama, but the inner Republican feud. Different interpretations offered for the defeat in New York, in combination with the Republican success in the two gubernatorial races, could be read as evidence of dissent within the Republican Party:

- Some in the Republican vanguard, such as Michael Steele and Mike Huckabee, accused conservative activists of affecting the primary process in an unhelpful way. Moderate Republicans hope that voters will reward the focus on economic concerns (“Jobs!”) and try to re-brand the Republican Party as the party of economic responsibility, while attacking “elitist Democrats in Washington who waste tax payer money in arrogant top-down public sector schemes”.
- Paradoxically, the defeat of Mr. Hoffmann in New York could serve to embolden his fellow conservatives. Erick Erickson, editor of the Conservative blog [“Red State”](#) took the debacle in New York as a positive indicator: “So we have demonstrated to the GOP that it must not take conservatives for granted”.
- This inner Republican feud might next be observed in Florida, where Republican Governor Charlie Crist is running for the Senate. Crist has raised the ire of the “new conservatives” by supporting Obama’s stimulus bill, and they have thrown their support behind a third candidate, [Marco Rubio](#).

In short: despite the evidence of voter preference for more moderate approaches, conservatives who are outraged, fired up, and ready to rumble are not about to give up and retreat.

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