

ELECTION PREVIEW: GOVERNORS
Small Field, Big Republican Hopes

Not many governors' races are on the ballot next year, but those states that are in play give Republicans a great chance to pick up seats.

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Rematch: Bev Perdue of North Carolina is one of several Democratic governors being blamed for the poor economy.

If the states are the laboratories of democracy, then governors' mansions are the petri dishes in which presidential ambitions are cultivated. Americans like elevating governors to the White House: State chief executives have won nine of the last 11 presidential elections. And the two most likely candidates to win the Republican presidential nomination next year, Mitt Romney and Rick Perry, have both been governors.

At a time when many voters care more about party affiliations than the candidates themselves, gubernatorial elections provide the rare opportunity for crossover voting. That's why Democrats have been able to elect governors in Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming, which are normally deep-red states. By the same token, the Republican Romney was able to lead liberal Massachusetts and other Republicans won office in Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont among the bluest of the blue states.

That seemingly odd pattern of success happens for two reasons. First, voters view gubernatorial candidates differently than they view candidates for federal office; a governor is much more likely to be associated with a local issue, such as transportation funding or education, than with national hot-buttons such as health care reform or abortion. In states dominated by one political party at the state and federal level, a governor offers voters their easiest way to provide a check on the majority party. Romney was a counterbalance to the overwhelming Democratic majority on Beacon Hill, for example.

Second, voters are able to see the immediate results of a governor's agenda. That makes them more likely to support a successful governor, regardless of party. All three Democratic governors in Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming were elected to a second term by wide margins, as was Republican Don Carcieri of Rhode Island. Vermont's Jim Douglas, a Republican, took 53 percent of the vote to win his fourth two-year term in 2008 while President Obama was winning the state with 67 percent. (Douglas's Democratic rival came in third, with 22 percent, fractionally behind a candidate representing the Progressive Party.)

“Some voters are less sensitive to their own party allegiance or to a candidate’s party label when it comes to executive office,” said Kellyanne Conway, a Republican pollster aiding Rep. Mike Pence’s gubernatorial campaign in Indiana. “This is especially true of incumbents that are performing exceptionally well or incredibly poorly on the cusp of a reelection. Level-headed voters will not spite themselves and either ruin a decent thing or reward failure just because of party.”

Democrats are defending a number of vulnerable seats next year, due in part to retirements and in part to the miserable economy. That gives Republicans hope of winning seats they have not held in years—and, in one case, in generations. The issues over which the races are likely to be fought seem to benefit Republicans.

“The issue matrix certainly favors Republican candidates, and what I mean by that is, in most states, two-thirds or more of likely voters, including independents, would cite jobs and spending as their top priorities—issues on which Republicans have an advantage,” said Phil Cox, executive director of the Republican Governors Association.

That’s not to say that Democrats have no chance. Even in the wave election year of 2010, Democrats were able to salvage more seats than they probably should have. Republicans picked up 12 seats last year—in conservative bastions like Kansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Wyoming, as well as in more Democratic-leaning states like Maine, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

GOP losses in traditionally Democratic states that had elected GOP governors mitigated those wins. In Vermont, Douglas was succeeded by Democrat Peter Shumlin. Voters in California, Connecticut, Hawaii, and Minnesota elected Democrats to succeed outgoing Republicans. Rhode Island’s Carcieri was followed by Lincoln Chafee, the Republican-turned-independent who backed Obama in 2008.

After the 2010 elections, many Republicans felt they had left some seats on the table. Three Democrats—Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy, Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton, and Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber—all won by very narrow margins after money for GOP attack ads dried up in the final weeks of the year.

But in 2011, despite the nasty economic climate and a political wind at Republicans’ backs, neither party looks likely to make gains. In West Virginia, Democrats narrowly won a special election earlier this month, and in Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear is cruising toward reelection. Republican incumbent Bobby Jindal, in Louisiana, didn’t face a credible Democratic opponent and won another term. Mississippi Lt. Gov. Phil Bryant is on cruise control in his bid to succeed his boss, retiring Gov. Haley Barbour.

Democrats who are looking ahead to the 2012 elections find themselves in a familiar position: They won so much in 2008 that the party will now be on the defensive in a climate in which any incumbent is in danger.

“It’s a year where you’ve got Democratic governors running in Republican states to some extent, and some of these are tough states for us,” said Colm O’Comartun, executive director of the Democratic Governors’ Association.

Republicans are defending two seats that appear unlikely to flip, in North Dakota and Utah. Democrats will defend safe seats in Delaware and Vermont, while West Virginia—where Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin will seek a full term—also appears safe. The remaining six races, however, are much more competitive.

INDIANA

Obama won Indiana in 2008, but the state is all but out of reach for his reelection bid. Even in 2008, he couldn't help his party's nominee defeat Gov. Mitch Daniels, who won by 18 points.

This year, Democrats are fighting another uphill battle in what is perhaps their only pickup opportunity. The party will likely nominate former state House Speaker John Gregg, a candidate who would start without the nationwide fundraising base that Pence has enjoyed. But Democrats will paint Pence as a partisan bomb thrower, with Gregg playing the role of the everyman.

"Gregg is very Indiana. He's a very regular guy that I think folks can relate to easily," O'Comartun said.

Pence starts out as the favorite, according to Brian Howey, editor of Howey Politics Indiana, but the race isn't a foregone conclusion. State Democrats "are going to try to portray Gregg as somebody who's actually run things, managed things, whereas they're going to portray Pence as on the government payroll for a dozen years."

Pence is hugely popular with the very conservative base, Howey said, but he has to reach out to independent and female voters to hold the middle. Pence hasn't had to do that before, because he has been running without any real competition in an almost uniformly conservative congressional district.