

## Analysis: Nervous voters send message to Obama

### Independents break heavily for Republicans, helping GOP win

BY BETH FOUHY  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEW YORK (AP) — Voters nervous about the economy and fed up with the political establishment dominated the off-year elections, sending a strong message to President Barack Obama, who won the White House as a change agent but has himself become the face of political power and incumbency. Independents who supported Obama broke heavily for Republicans Tuesday, helping the GOP win marquee governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey. And the coalition of younger, minority voters who powered Obama's victory last year was replaced by an electorate that was noticeably whiter, especially in Virginia, where Democrat Creigh Deeds lost in a landslide.

Yet Democrats weren't the

only ones in danger, as voters also vented their frustration at incumbents and party insiders.

In upstate New York, Democrat Bill Owens won a House seat held for decades by Republicans in a special election dominated by a fierce intraparty GOP split.

There, conservatives and national Republican figures led by former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin helped force out assemblywoman Dede Scozzafava, the Republican candidate chosen by GOP county chairmen, in favor of Conservative Party candidate Doug Hoffman. The conservatives were incensed by Scozzafava's support for abortion rights and gay marriage.

In New York City, independent Mayor Michael Bloomberg barely won a third term against a little known, poorly funded Democratic chal-

lenger. Polls going into the election showed voters generally approved of Bloomberg's job performance but resented his aggressive effort to get the city's term limits law lifted and his expenditure of as much as \$100 million of his own money to stay in power.

To be sure, each race was as much about local issues as about firing warning shots at the politically powerful. But taken together, the results of the 2009 off-year elections could imperil Obama's ambitious legislative agenda and point to a challenging environment in midterm elections next year.

"In bad economic times, people don't like the politicians who are holding the reins of power," said Jack Pitney, a political science professor at Claremont McKenna College in California. "For Obama, it means the 2008 election was not a key to everlasting success. It was the first step in an ongoing journey, and he's going to have to work very hard to continue

earning voters' trust."

For now, Obama must worry about the impact of the 2009 contests on health care reform, his signature legislative priority.

Earlier Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said a vote on health care may not happen before the end of the year — a sign that some Democrats don't feel confident tying themselves to Obama and casting a controversial vote for his reform effort.

In the longer term, Democrats must figure out how to defend Senate seats and hang onto dozens of House districts they won in 2006 and 2008 that could be imperiled now.

Party strategists worry the Obama voters who helped elect Democrats up and down the ballot last year may sit out the midterms because the president isn't on the ballot, or because they're frustrated he's failed to bring the fundamental change to Washington that he promised.

Democrats must defend as many as 60 marginal House seats next year, many in districts the president lost or carried only narrowly in 2008, as opposed to about 40 for Republicans.

Tuesday's results also pointed to a somewhat reinvigorated Republican Party after it had been left for dead a year ago. That's largely thanks to independents, the fastest growing voter bloc, and the most notoriously fickle.

In Virginia, Republican Bob McDonnell won a whopping 66 percent of the independent vote, helping him bury Deeds, who got just 33 percent. Obama narrowly carried independents in the state last year, helping him become the first Democrat to win the state in a presidential contest since 1964.

In New Jersey, Republican Chris Christie won a much tighter race against incumbent Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine, largely on the strength of independents. Christie won 60 percent of

the independent vote after Obama won a majority of independents last year.

The GOP brand is still weak — several recent polls show the percentage of voters calling themselves Republicans has dipped into the low 20s — and the breakaway conservative movement seen in the upstate New York congressional race could further erode the party's efforts to broaden and rebuild.

But the two gubernatorial victories Tuesday proved Republicans can win if they choose candidates responsive to the mood of their state's electorate.

"Republicans are a conservative party, all Republicans generally are," GOP strategist Alex Castellanos said. "The question is, can Republican candidates stand on conservative principles and win the middle? That's what McDonnell and Christie were able to do."

Beth Fouhy covers national politics for The Associated Press.

## Defeat in Maine a harsh blow to proponents of gay marriage

BY DAVID CRARY  
AP NATIONAL WRITER

The stars seemed aligned for supporters of gay marriage. They had Maine's governor, legislative leaders and major newspapers on their side, plus a huge edge in campaign funding. So losing a landmark referendum was a devastating blow, for activists in Maine and nationwide.

In an election that had been billed for weeks as too close to call, Maine's often unpredictable voters repealed a state law Tuesday that would have allowed same-sex couples to wed. Gay marriage has now lost in all 31 states in which it has been put to a popular vote — a trend that the gay-rights movement had believed it could end in Maine.

"Today's heartbreaking defeat unfortunately shows that lies and fear can still win at the ballot box," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

With 87 percent of the precincts reporting, gay-marriage foes had 53 percent of the vote. They prevailed in many of Maine's far-flung small towns and lost by a less-than-expected margin in the state's biggest city, Portland.

"The institution of marriage has been preserved in Maine and across the nation," declared Frank Schubert, chief organizer for the winning side.

Attention will now turn to other states, including California — where Schubert was an instrumental strategist a year ago in the successful campaign to overturn cost-ordered same-sex marriage.

Gay-rights activists have been planning to go back to the ballot in California, either in 2010 or 2012, in another attempt to legalize gay marriage. But the Maine result was not the victory they had been hoping for to fire up their troops.

Brian Brown of the National Organization for Marriage, a conservative group that steered substantial funds to fight gay marriage in both California and Maine, was elated by Tuesday's result, saying it shows that "that even in a New England state, if the voters have a chance to have their say, they're going to protect and defend the commonsense definition of marriage."

At issue in the referendum was a law passed by Maine's Legislature last spring that

would have allowed gays to wed. The law was put on hold after conservatives launched a petition drive to repeal it.

Five other states have legalized gay marriage — starting with Massachusetts in 2004, and followed by Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Iowa — but all did so through legislation or court rulings, not by popular vote. In contrast, constitutional amendments banning gay marriage have been approved in all 30 states where they have been on the ballot.

Brown said "out-of-touch legislators" are a principal reason same-sex marriage

has taken hold in New England.

"What we're saying is give us a chance to take our message to the people and let the people decide," he said. He also suggested that the outcome in Maine will give pause to lawmakers in New York and New Jersey, where gay-marriage legislation is pending.

Richard Socarides, who was an adviser on gay-rights issues in the Clinton administration, said the loss in Maine should prompt gay-rights leaders to reconsider their state-by-state strategy on marriage and shift in-

stead to lobbying for changes on the federal level that expand recognition of same-sex couples.

In Maine, gay-marriage supporters conceded early Wednesday.

"We're in this for the long haul," said Jesse Connolly, manager of the pro-gay marriage campaign. "For next week, and next month, and next year — until all Maine families are treated equally. Because in the end, this has always been about love and family and that will always be something worth fighting for."



Partners Lisa Brackbill, left, and Lisa Pugh, right, console one another along with Darlene Huntress, center.

AP/PAT WELLENBACH

A similar note was sounded by Democratic Gov. John Baldacci, who signed the bill into law last May and spoke into defense of the law.

"If we don't get to the top

of the mountain tonight, we've made a significant stride. And we're going to get there," he said late Tuesday. "We will get to the top of the mountain."

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