

RR: Implications of Virginia's Gubernatorial Race

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[Last weekend, hundreds of Virginia's leading Republicans gathered to evaluate Ken Cuccinelli's loss to Terry McAuliffe and to strategize for 2014. According to Politico's James Hohmann, most of them view Cuccinelli's 2.5 point defeat as a victory, particularly given that most analysts predicted a double-digit loss. Certainly, the Tea Party narrative that Cuccinelli would have won if he wasn't abandoned by the Republican establishment, which devoted minimal fundraising resources, has some credence. In Northern Virginia, for example, Cuccinelli ran no TV ads during the last two weeks into election day due to lack of funding. And we'd certainly agree that Cuccinelli would probably win the race for governor if the November 5th election were held today. As we reported to clients on November 27, Republicans have regained the political momentum since the government shutdown in October, thanks to the Obamacare rollout, which began in October and whose failures became increasingly apparent in November.

So, given all that we know today about the GOP's post-mortem on Cucinelli's loss in the purple, swing state of Virginia, what will be the GOP strategy going into November 2014?

Almost without question, the results of the Virginia race indicate nothing is settled in the civil war between the Tea Party and the Republican Establishment. The Tea Party is not going away. Meanwhile, the Establishment will continue to resist any appearance of conservative 'extremism.' However, both wings of the GOP are training their sights on Obamacare as the defining issue going into the November 2014 election. Unfortunately, neither side views economic growth as the political and economic priority. BWR]

[No soul-searching for Virginia GOP after losses](#)

By: James Hohmann

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HOT SPRINGS, Va. — Virginia Republicans suffered a drubbing last month, losing all three statewide races (though a recount is impending in one). A year earlier, it was pretty much the same story as Mitt Romney got swamped and the party unexpectedly lost ground in the Senate.

But to hear GOP leaders in this once reliably red state tell it, this is no time to panic. No hint of discouragement is betrayed. Just as many party activists insisted after Romney's loss, key figures here said that their shortcomings are cosmetic — that the problem is largely about campaign mechanics and how the conservative message is being delivered, not the message itself.

So if the Commonwealth, sure to again be a top battleground in 2016, is a microcosm for the broader Republican Party, the GOP faithful here weren't showing much interest in the kind of soul-searching many in the GOP believe is necessary if they want to win big elections again.

"All these reports of our demise are premature," said Bill Howell, speaker of the state House of Delegates. "The cycle swings, and we'll be back."

Gathering this weekend for the first time since crusading conservative Ken Cuccinelli's narrower-than-expected 2.5-percentage-point defeat, a chorus of activists, elected officials and other party hands stressed that Cuccinelli's ideology was not his undoing.

They blamed the loss on a failure and inability to more aggressively push back against Democratic Gov.-elect Terry McAuliffe's avalanche of negative ads. They argued that more money, not having a third-party candidate in the race and a scandal-free governor would have made the difference. And they pointed to bad timing: the election came shortly after an unpopular shutdown but before the problems with Obamacare fully seeped into the public consciousness.

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“He faced a near perfect storm,” said Rep. Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. “If you took out one or two of those things, he would have been elected governor of Virginia.”

The annual Republican Party of Virginia retreat — which party leaders dub “The Advance” to make clear they aren’t “retreating” – drew about 450 conservatives to The Homestead resort, a few hundred miles from Washington.

For the first time since 1969, the GOP probably won’t control any of the five statewide offices. For the first time since 1973, the party that won the presidential election the year before also won the governorship.

Republicans pointed to bright spots, repeatedly citing exit polls that showed Cuccinelli overperformed among married women and younger people. With polls wrongly predicting a Cuccinelli wipeout, some analysts also expected big Republican losses in the House of Delegates. But, thanks in part to redistricting, the party kept a sizable majority — losing only one seat.

State party Chairman Pat Mullins accused the media of covering “war on women” attacks more aggressively than the problems with Obamacare.

“This year, our message couldn’t break through and we paid a price,” he said.

Mullins mocked post-election analysis that said Cuccinelli was too conservative for a changing state.

“This is false narrative by false prophets,” he said. “Republicans do not win when we are mini-Democrats or Democrat Lite.”

There is a pervasive feeling that the Obamacare rollout was closing the gap that had opened in polls during the shutdown, and that they could have won had the election been later in November.

“The margin was so close that those couple weeks could have made the real difference, and I really think he was a good candidate,” said Susan Cobb of Falls Church, who retired this year after 13 years working for Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah).

Cuccinelli himself seemed to endorse this idea during a surprise speech here Saturday night, and he faulted Republicans who lacked faith in his ability to win and the major donors who never opened their checkbooks. Cuccinelli noted that he “went dark” on Northern Virginia television two weeks out because he did not have the cash.

The failed nominee warned repeatedly against moderating the GOP message in the wake of his defeat.

“We believe in principles,” Cuccinelli said. “That’s why we’re here.”

Many others said the problem was not with the message, but the “messaging” — how candidates explain their conservatism.

Ed Gillespie, a former state and national Republican chairman, said, “There’s a lot we can do” to better identify and turn out voters. But he said the primary challenge is to “get our message honed in a way that resonates with a lot of voters in the middle, persuadable voters.”

“It was a close race,” said Gillespie, who is mulling a run against Sen. Mark Warner next year. “Democrats talk more often than we do about lifting people out of poverty, expanding the middle class, addressing income inequality and upward mobility when, in fact, their policies make those things worse and our policies make those things better. We’d do well to talk more about those policies.”

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Speaking at a luncheon on Saturday, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor made a similar argument. He said the party's challenge is to convince voters that it is looking out for them while avoiding GOP infighting.

"If we speak directly to the people and explain why our conservative solutions work and why liberal ideas are set up to fail, there is no beating our Republican Party," Cantor said.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who was supposed to keynote a Saturday gala but canceled because of weather, sent a short video greeting.

"Four words: do not be discouraged," he said. "The sting of setback is fleeting and will pale in comparison to the joy you're going to feel when Republicans win in 2014."

After watching Democrats effectively run the "war on women" playbook the past two cycles, there was agreement among Virginia activists that GOP candidates must address issues like abortion differently. But there is disagreement about what exactly that means, and there are not widespread calls to back off from the platform's strong opposition to abortion.

Trying to keep the focus on pocketbook issues and afraid of giving the attacks more oxygen, for much of the year Cuccinelli avoided forcefully responding to suggestions that he would take away the pill, make it more difficult to get divorced and limit abortions.

RNC national committeeman Morton Blackwell said the party must more "effectively respond to campaigns of vilification" in the future.

"There was nothing wrong about his political match with the voters of Virginia," Blackwell said of Cuccinelli. "It would have been helpful if Ken had not, through much of the campaign, gone silent on his pro-life and other traditional values positions."

Several conservative loyalists expressed contempt for moderate Republican Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling, who dropped out of the Republican race for governor after Cuccinelli maneuvered to change the way the nominee would be picked from a primary to a convention. Bolling stayed officially neutral but maneuvered behind the scenes to help McAuliffe.

Bolling, who did not attend the gathering, wrote an op-ed for the Richmond Times-Dispatch last week that laid out five steps to revitalize the GOP. One of them was to stop selecting nominees at party conventions, which tend to settle on more conservative candidates.

"While such conventions might empower a few thousand of the most strident voices within our party, they effectively lock out other voices that should be heard," he wrote. "They too often result in the nomination of candidates who simply can't get elected when judged by a broader Virginia electorate."

Many from the Bolling wing of the party cite the 10-point loss of E.W. Jackson, who came out of nowhere to win the nomination for lieutenant governor at a May convention despite a history of controversial remarks, as reason to return to a primary system for picking nominees.

But there is not currently the support for such a move on the state central committee.

Jackson chastised Bolling and other Republicans who didn't support him.

"Look, this is my humble opinion," he said, "if you go work for the other side, why don't you just join them and get it over with?"

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