NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Election Day

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 5, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

It?s Election Day, at least in some parts of the country. Even though today is not a national election, with the kinds of results that set the terms of governance for the next two or four years, the results will be examined for lessons for next year?s mid-term elections. And those lessons are already apparent, at least for Republicans.

In New Jersey, incumbent Governor Chris Christie is expected to cruise to victory. The only question is the size of his margin of victory. New Jersey is an increasingly blue state, so Christie?s ability to rack up a big win will strengthen the argument among establishment Republicans that a moderately conservative candidate has the best shot at winning a national election.

In point of fact, Christie is cruising largely on the strength of his, dare we say it, over-sized personality. He comes across as a typical New Jerseyite: brash, unafraid of confrontation, but not exactly ideological. You can imagine him breaking up a barroom brawl on an episode of ?Jersey Shore? but you have trouble imagining him rousing a group of southern, evangelical voters. His recent decision not to appeal a court decision requiring same-sex marriage was greeted with howls of betrayal from social conservatives, but it did not cause a drop in his poll numbers. And, during Superstorm Sandy, his public embrace of President Obama days before the 2012 election, showed not only an independent streak, but an awareness that the one things a governor must get right is a response to a tragedy. President George W. Bush never recovered from his mishandling of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. Governor Ella Grasso, who was trailing in the polls at the start of her re-election bid in 1978, rebounded after she, like Christie, responded decisively to the Blizzard of 1978. I remember her helicopter landing on the field across from our town?s fire station when she came to inspect the damage. She was seen to be leading the charge, standing with the people, and it propelled her to an easy re-election victory ten months later.

The one thing Christie needs to be careful about is speaking overmuch about the virtue of being able to win elections. It is true that you can?t influence policy unless you win elections, but it is also true that this line of reasoning can sound like desiring power for power?s sake. People want to see some conviction in their politicians.

In Virginia, the Republicans are likely to lose the governor?s race because their candidate, Ken Cuccinelli is nothing but a bundle of convictions. His record is that of a zealous ideologue, including an infamous attempt to intimidate climate change researchers at the University of Virginia. For someone who wishes to sit where Thomas Jefferson sat, in the governor?s chair, Cuccinelli?s attack on the independence of Mr. Jefferson?s university, and on the idea that science has important information to yield, was as politically stupid as it was offensive in its own right.

For the past nine straight gubernatorial elections in the Old Dominion, the party that controls the White House

has lost the Virginia governor?s race. The fact that Cuccinelli is likely to lose, and to lose to such a mediocre candidate as Democrat Terry McAuliffe, should send a clear message to Republicans: When you nominate a zealot, you are likely to lose.

There was one interesting development in the Virginia contest that warrants some attention from political scientists. Cuccinelli won the GOP nod at a state party convention, not in a primary. He fought to have the gubernatorial nomination decided at a convention because he feared he would lose a primary to the more moderate incumbent Lieutenant Governor, Bill Bolling. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, more and more states switched from nominating conventions to primaries, and, at the time, this was seen as helping to advance the prospects of more ideologically driven candidates, a blow to the establishment, the end to decisions being made in smoke-filled rooms. Conventions were decidedly establishment affairs. I suspect that it is the internet that has changed all that, as well as the fact that many states allow open primaries in which independents can vote in a party primary. It would be interesting to see some hard research into this phenomenon. And, as much as liberals might gag at the thought, I think a case can be made that our political life as a nation has suffered since the disappearance of party bosses like John Bailey. Certainly, today?s GOP is in need of the equivalent of a Bailey, who would come in and tell the elected politicians that they were going to pass immigration reform tomorrow because the long-term interest of the party demanded it.

The most interesting race today is the GOP primary in Alabama?s first congressional District. [1]There, establishment Republicans are strongly backing the candidacy of Bradley Byrne against the Tea Party candidate Dean Young. Traditional Republican business groups like the Chamber of Commerce have showered Byrne?s campaign with funds. Curiously, Young is so extreme, dabbling in birtherism for example, even most Tea Party groups have shied away from endorsing him. But, the most recent polls show a tight race. If Young can mobilize his network of evangelical Christian voters, all the money being spent by Byrne may not make a difference. Alabama?s 1st congressional district is rock-ribbed Republican, so the winner of today?s primary is almost guaranteed to win the special election in December.

If, as expected, Christie wins big and Cuccinelli loses, the take-away in the reporting tomorrow will be that Republicans must confront their Tea Party extremists and tame them. If you ride the tiger, you go where the tiger wants to go, unless you tame him. But, if Young pulls off a win in the Alabama race, a more disconcerting message will be sent to establishment Republicans: You can?t rely on Chamber of Commerce money to win a GOP primary, you need to create networks of voters and mobilize them. Creating networks is not an easy task. It is much easier to tap into an existing network. That was why the Moral Majority became such a force in GOP politics almost overnight: There had long been a network of conservative Christian institutions, from church schools to publishing houses, and all that was needed was to add politics to their to-do list. It was easy for the GOP to stoke the flames of the religiously motivated voters. It will be far more difficult to control the resulting fire.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-alabama-election-a-showdown-bewteen-the-gop-establishment-and-the-tea-party/2013/11/04/7ad9eee2-44ce-11e3-bf0c-cebf37c6f484_story.html?hpid=z3