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An Anti-Trump Wave?

By Matt A. Mayer

With Democratic gubernatorial wins in New Jersey and Virginia earlier this month, pundits and prognosticators are predicting the coming of the four horsemen of the apocalypse for Republicans in the midterm elections a year from now. These babbling bloviators are blaming President Donald Trump for the two losses, and it's true his governing style may have contributed. But other reasons likely drove those election outcomes.

New Jersey is among the bluest of blue states. It last went for a Republican presidential candidate nearly 30 years ago, when it joined most of America in voting for George H.W. Bush over Michael Dukakis. Though current Gov. Chris Christie is a Republican, he possesses the worst approval rating in America, a dismal 23 percent. In other words, New Jersey voting for a Democratic statewide candidate is about as surprising as gambling in a casino.

Virginia last voted for a Republican for president in 2004 when it supported the re-election of George W. Bush. Similarly, the state has only elected one Republican governor, Bob McDonnell, and one Republican U.S. senator, incumbent John Warner, since 2002. The blue population explosion in Northern Virginia has made that area substantially bluer than it ever was, and hard for the less populated red parts of Virginia to match in statewide elections. Virginia likely lost its battleground purple status in 2012.

Notably, both Christie and McDonnell were swept in during the historic tea party wave elections beginning in 2009.

Do these alternative explanations for those recent wins mean there won't be a Democratic wave election in 2018? Hardly. Recent history indicates Democrats will pick up seats in Congress, state legislatures and gubernatorial offices. The presidency has become a bit toxic for the party in power no matter who sits in the Oval Office.

On the cusp of Bush's election victory in 2000, Democrats held 3,819 legislative seats across America versus 3,531 seats for Republicans. Republicans held 30 gubernatorial offices compared to just 20 for Democrats. Republicans also held 49 seats in U.S. Senate and 221 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. After September 11, 2001, the country rallied behind Bush as he pursued Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida, and Republicans gained seats in Congress in 2002 and 2004.

As the Afghanistan and Iraq wars dragged on and produced increasing casualty counts, America grew weary of Bush. Republicans lost significant ground in the 2006 election.

By Barack Obama's presidential victory in 2008, Democrats had gained the advantage in all seats of power. They held 4,082 state legislative seats versus 3,223 for Republicans. Democrats reversed course over the Bush years, earning control of 28 gubernatorial offices, as Republicans dropped to 22 governor's offices. In Washington, Democrats controlled the U.S. Senate with 56 members plus two independents compared to just 41 Republicans. In the U.S. House, Democrats controlled the levers of power by a 255 to 178 majority.

Bush's presidency had been a disaster for Republican officeholders across the country. How would the Obama presidency fare? Even worse.

Over the course of eight highly partisan years of the Obama presidency and his constitutionally suspect use of unilateral executive authority, a Republican wave began to build even as the country recovered economically. Republicans made major gains across the country in 2010 and 2014, with 2012 being largely a wash election between the two parties due to the higher turnout for Obama that didn't translate broadly to other Democrats.

By January 2017, not only did Trump win the presidency, but Republicans took control across the country at the highest level since the 1920s. Specifically, Republicans control 4,162 state legislative seats to just 3,114 seats for Democrats. Republicans hold 33 governor's offices to just 16 for Democrats. Republicans took total control of Congress with a 52-46 majority in the U.S. Senate and a 241 to 194 majority in the U.S. House. Republicans now control both the presidency and Congress.

Based on this history, it seems highly likely that Democrats will gain seats at the federal and state level in 2018. After all, given the current dominance by Republicans and the influence of gerrymandering, Democrats really can't do much worse. The only two curveballs that can thwart history would be either a major event that rallies Americans behind Trump and the leadership in Congress or a nonpresidential year turnout that favors Republicans.

In terms of the former, the list of events that could bring Americans together include a war with North Korea or another major terrorist attack. Let's hope neither event occurs.

When it comes to the latter, Republican voters want to see major successes in Washington or they simply will stay home on Election Day, as they did two weeks ago. That

reality is what is driving Republicans in Congress to try and pass a major tax reform bill by the end of the year in follow-up to the Obamacare repeal debacle. If Republicans can pass major reforms for Trump to sign, the expected Democratic wave election in 2018 could be delayed until 2020 or 2022.

Regardless, history shows the electoral mood of the country will swing back towards the Democrats before the Trump presidency ends in 2020 or 2024. If that swing can be delayed until another U.S. Supreme Court justice is appointed and major legislative reforms are passed, that swing may not matter all that much. As 2017 has shown, reversing course legislatively is a lot harder than winning elections, especially if your party controls the White House.

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