

APP.com

@ISSUE: Is N.J. true blue, or is there some red?

Written by

Michael Daniels | Staff Writer

New Jersey hasn't backed a Republican presidential candidate since 1988 or elected a GOP U.S. Senate candidate since 1972. The state Legislature has been solidly in Democratic hands for a decade. And on many of the issues often used to gauge a state's liberal or conservative leanings, polling shows that New Jerseyans lean more left than right.

So, does this make New Jersey a solidly blue state, as it is perceived by many of the national pollsters and political talking heads?

Perhaps not.

Those who follow such things closely say the right Republican candidate for the White House or the U.S. Senate could certainly prevail in the Garden State, bucking the aforementioned trends.

In pointing out that New Jersey isn't loyally left through and through, they draw on a wealth of evidence, including the election of Chris Christie as governor in 2009, the state's evenly divided delegation in the House of Representatives and voter rolls that show there are more independents than registered Democrats in the state.

Bottom line: "New Jersey has never been as blue as the national media and punditry have made it out to be," Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray says.

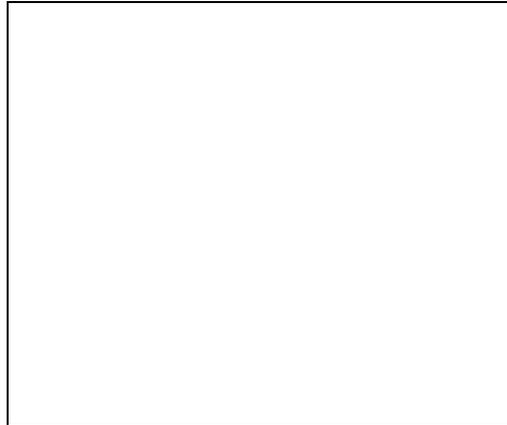
The evidence

New Jersey has more than 5.2 million registered voters. Of them, 1.75 million are Democrats. A little less than 1.1 million are Republicans. And 2.4 million are unaffiliated with either of the major parties.

So independents who can and have in the past swung either way in elections constitute the biggest bloc of voters in the state, not Democrats. In fact, while there are many counties thought of as being overwhelmingly Democratic, only two — Essex and Hudson — have more registered Democrats than independents. One county, Cape May, has more registered Republicans than independents.

While Democratic candidates have prevailed in presidential and U.S. Senate

Advertisement



APP.com

racers in New Jersey in recent decades, that hasn't always been the case. Before New Jerseyans went with Democrats for the White House in five straight elections (1992-2008), they backed Republican candidates in six straight presidential races.

And some of the wins for Democrats here have been close. In 2000, Democrat Jon Corzine beat Republican Bob Franks in a U. S. Senate race by just 4 percentage points despite spending \$62 million of his own money on the campaign.

President Barack Obama won New Jersey by a margin of about 57 to 42 in 2008. His margin of victory was much wider in neighboring New York, Connecticut and Delaware.

"We all make sweeping generalizations about the state based on (Senate) races that could have gone one way or the other. They were close races," says John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of New Jersey Politics at Rutgers University.

Protect incumbents

With state government, New Jerseyans have a history of flipping the party in the Governor's Office every eight years. Christie's victory in 2009 may extend that pattern. The eight years before him saw two different Democrats (Corzine and Jim McGreevey) elected governor, and the eight years before that saw Republican Christine Whitman elected twice.

Control of the Legislature has been dependent on how the legislative district map was drawn. Since a district map favored by Democrats was put in place after the 2000 census, Democrats have had majorities in the state Senate and Assembly.

But before that in the 1990s, when a legislative map favored by Republicans was being used, the GOP had control in the Legislature for a time.

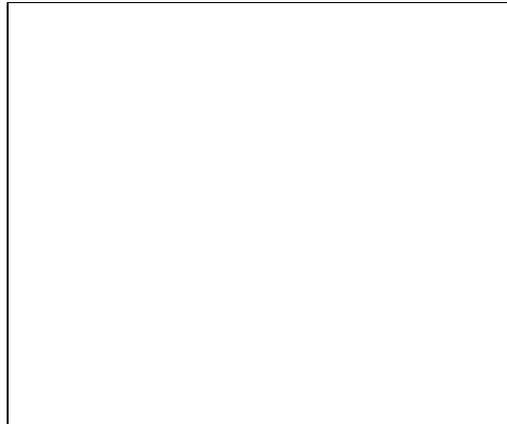
The newest legislative district map, drawn from the 2010 census, is largely similar to the 2000 map, and Democrats are expected to retain control of the state Senate and Assembly.

Mind of the people

So what allows some Republicans to win statewide elections here while others fail miserably?

"We're a state that's not liberal, but we say

Advertisement



social issues shouldn't be on the table," Murray says. He attributes social issues not playing well in elections to New Jersey's diversity, which has fostered a certain attitude.

"Live and let live, that describes New Jersey politics," Murray says. Polling he's done on the issue of gay marriage, where 40 percent oppose it, 40 percent are for it and 20 percent "move around," demonstrates that ethos.

In practice, what this has meant, Murray says, is that Republicans who have been seen as social conservatives haven't fared well in elections.

Bret Schundler in 2001 and Jim Courter in 1989, both conservative gubernatorial candidates, lost badly to Democratic candidates.

Avoid social issues

Christie, Whitman and Tom Kean Sr. in the 1980s, on the other hand, sold fiscal conservatism and steered clear of social issues when campaigning. All three won their gubernatorial races.

Steve Kush, a Republican political consultant and campaign organizer who worked on Christie's gubernatorial campaign in the state's southernmost counties, says for Republican candidates to be successful in New Jersey, it's all about messaging.

"Especially in areas where the cities are ...

you have to moderate your message some. You have to make the message about what people care about, which is their pocketbook," Kush says.

Kush, currently doing campaign work for Republicans in New Mexico, has worked for GOP candidates in several states, including deep-red Alabama.

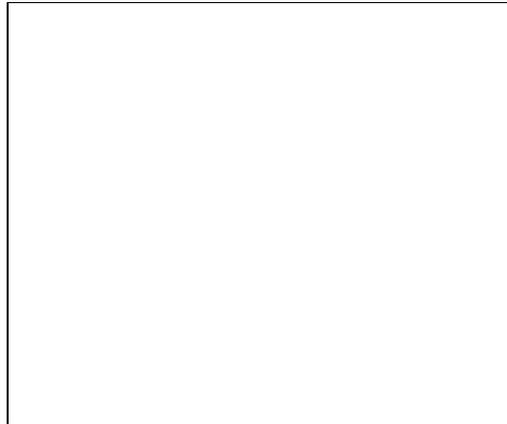
Moderation needed

Echoing Murray's position, Kush says the social issues that often are everything in Alabama races don't play at all with New Jersey voters. Weingart says the old axiom in New Jersey for a Republican running for governor was that you had to be moderate and, with abortion, be pro-choice.

"Chris Christie proved that wrong and is such a presence in New Jersey life right now that it's hard to know how much that might change things," Weingart says.

There are no indications that on Election

Advertisement



APP.com

Day in a little over two weeks New Jerseyans are ready to heed Christie's call to replace Democratic legislators en masse and put Republicans back in charge of the Legislature. In fact, Christie isn't sticking his neck out with any such predictions.

But what about next year, when New Jerseyans will vote in a U.S. Senate race that will pit Democratic incumbent Robert Menendez against a to-be-determined Republican challenger, and in a presidential race that will pit Obama against Mitt Romney, businessman Herman Cain or some other Republican?

Don't rule out GOP

Weingart says how voters perceive the state of the broken political system in Washington and where the economy is next year will likely determine the outcome of the elections.

Both Kush and Murray say they think a Republican candidate could score a victory in New Jersey in either the presidential race or a Senate race.

"It's possible, it depends on who the nominee is," Murray says. "Assuming Romney is the (presidential) nominee, his campaign might try looking at the possibility of picking up New Jersey."

If it's one of the more conservative Republicans facing Obama, Murray says that candidate would more likely write off campaigning in the Garden State.

Kush agrees: "I think Romney plays in New

Jersey better than obviously a Rick Perry would."

Advertisement

