Why The Democrats Won

November 21, 2001

"I am ruling out a tax increase," the new Governor of debt-ridden New Jersey declared the day after his election. He said he is embarking on "an agonizing reappraisal of what government should do, and perhaps more importantly, what government ought not be doing."
Is this a disciple of Ronald Reagan speaking? A politician who is truly dedicated to less government and lower taxes?

No, this is a liberal the day after his campaign against a principled conservative ended. Jim McGreevey, who voted for a massive New Jersey tax hike in the '90s, is talking like an anti-tax conservative today.

Credit the man he defeated, Bret Schundler, for this apparent transformation. Schundler, in his concession speech the night before, had pointedly warned McGreevey against resorting to tax increases.

Schundler's vigorous campaigning forced McGreevey to promise not to increase taxes. "We are going to look to him to do that, and we are going to hold him to those promises," Schundler said.

In addition to promising not to raise taxes, McGreevey declared that "I am committed for New Jersey state government to be operated in a cost-effective, fiscally conservative and responsible manner. And we will have to make difficult decisions." He is singing from the conservative song sheet.

Few really expect McGreevey to live up to his post-election conservative talk. But Schundler, a relentless former All-State football player, will keep on the pressure during the next four years.

Schundler proved his influence when he single-handedly stopped a plan to build a costly new sports arena in Newark. All the political powers supported the plan, which included goodies for them, but Schundler derailed it by demanding that it be put to a vote of the people.

McGreevey now agrees with Schundler about that issue, too. The day after the election, McGreevey described the plan for the new sports arena as "a $1 billion pork fest" and promised to oppose any plan that would burden taxpayers.

Bret Schundler's scrutiny and sharp criticism of government waste have changed the landscape and the vocabulary for all Garden State politicians. His principled stances combined with his populist appeal have liberals worried about what he will say next, even after his defeat.

McGreevey and the national Democratic Party defeated Schundler only by pouring unprecedented resources into a negative campaign. McGreevey's side outspent Schundler's by a margin estimated to be at least three to one.

Every major newspaper endorsed McGreevey, who then ran ads featuring those endorsements. Moderate Republicans, including the acting Governor, refused to endorse the conservative Schundler.

The "big tent" that moderates and the media use to club conservatives into supporting moderate candidates does not work both ways when a hard-charging conservative like Schundler wins the nomination. Even President Bush's own Cabinet member, left-leaning Christine Todd Whitman, was vocal in her criticism of Schundler at a pivotal time early in the campaign.

The race for Governor of Virginia was similar and the outcome was the same. The liberal Democrat vastly outspent the conservative Republican there, and President Bush was a no-show.

Although the liberal candidates in both New Jersey and Virginia spent far greater amounts of campaign money, they still could win only by talking like conservatives. Mark Warner even courted the pro-gun vote to put him over the top for the Virginia governorship.

As for Hillary and Bill Clinton, their old-fashioned liberalism fared poorly. Neither Senator Hillary's endorsement nor Bill's new office in the Big Apple were able to save Mark Green from his loss to Republican Michael Bloomberg for mayor.

Democratic National Chairman Terry McAuliffe funneled massive resources into the New Jersey and Virginia races while the national Republicans stayed away and kept their wallets closed. McAuliffe crowed that the election results were a referendum on the Republican Party's "stale ideas."

Even the liberal Newark Star-Ledger, which had endorsed McGreevey "by a mile," brushed off McAuliffe's comments as "nothing but predictable spin." The liberal candidates know they won because they talked like conservatives.

President Bush, unfortunately, was missing in action all during these important campaigns, even before 9/11. He refused to fundraise for the New Jersey or Virginia gubernatorial candidates, with his spokesman using the pretext that the elections were merely local.

Meanwhile, conservatives and pro-lifers elected 12 new Republicans to Virginia's House of Delegates, sweeping to a 64-35 majority, where they can help Mark Warner stick to his conservative promises. Virginia law term-limits the Governor, but not the legislators, to four years.

In New Jersey, the moderates are thoroughly discredited by their disgraceful opposition to the Republican nominee. Symbolizing the end of the moderate stranglehold, New Jersey Congresswoman Marge Roukema just announced her retirement, yielding her seat to likely capture by a Schundler supporter.