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Democrats May Carry Tuesday, but Lose It Next Year

Picture of What Voters Want Is Clouded; Some Pollsters See Incumbents Having the Edge in 2002

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Democrats are favored to win major election victories in Virginia, New Jersey and New York on Tuesday, and in more normal times they would be justified in crowing about how a possible sweep in those races might boost their prospects in next year's crucial midterm elections. But these are hardly normal times.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, many strategists think that in next year's elections voters will put a higher premium on the *kind of experience, calm and confidence* exhibited by New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (R). That could work to the benefit of incumbents, but there is no way to know that from Tuesday's voting because there are no incumbents on the ballot in the major races.

The campaigns—gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey and a mayoral race in New York to select Giuliani's successor—have been so divorced from the national focus on terrorism that they may be even less reflective of national trends than usual.

Still there may be some clues to the future coming out of the results, and party strategists already are trying to determine what those lessons learned might be. As one GOP strategist put it, "If we lose both races [Virginia and New Jersey] by double digits, I'd say let's be honest about what broader factors we ought to be concerned about that could be factors in 2002."

One thing both parties will be measuring is the potency of the GOP's anti-tax message, which *appears to have lost strength at a* time when voters are looking to government to make airports safer, protect against outbreaks of anthrax and head off future terrorist attacks. President Bush's major domestic achievement is a $1.3 trillion tax cut, and he is pushing additional reductions to stimulate the economy. Democrats anticipate a renewed clash on this issue next year.

Another is the power of negative campaigns, which so far have not shown much ability to move voters in New Jersey or Virginia. Partisan debate has not been ruled out of bounds and negative ads will not disappear because of the war on terrorism, but some strategists said candidates could pay a higher price for petty partisanship or harshly negative campaigning than in the past.

A third question some Republicans are asking is whether their candidates have found a strong rationale for their candidacies that fits the current mood. In next year's races for governor, where Republicans already are worried about losses because of recent or pending retirements in key states, the Virginia and New Jersey campaigns may prove instructive. But the events of Sept. 11 will force candidates in both parties to rethink their campaign agendas.

There is good reason to be cautious about overinterpreting Tuesday's elections. Eight years ago, Republican victories in Virginia, New Jersey and New York, along with the Los Angeles mayor's race, foreshadowed dissatisfaction with President Bill Clinton and helped propel the GOP to its 1994 takeovers of the House and Senate. But this year's elections have been in no way a referendum on Bush or the Congress, both of which are enjoying big boosts in popularity.

"September 11 creates a stage where incumbents have enormous opportunities to prove themselves," said Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster. "There's a lot of evidence that, in terms of national politics, this has produced a rally around not just President Bush but around all incumbents in Washington. People believe that September 11 has brought out the best in everybody in the political system."



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In New Jersey, GOP gubernatorial candidate Bret Schundler, left, holds gift he was given after speech to Dar-Ul Islam mosque in Elizabeth, while Democrat Jim McGreevey, right, campaigns at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. New Jersey and Virginia will elect governors Tuesday, New York a mayor.

It is clear the war on terrorism has changed public perceptions of the president and enhanced his image, particularly with independent and swing voters.

Democrats have been careful to avoid direct criticism of the president. Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe routinely describes Bush as "the flag," and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has refrained from attacking Bush even in its direct mail appeals.

If Bush's popularity holds, that could help Republicans next year, particularly in races for the House and Senate. But Tuesday's contests suggest that 90 percent approval ratings do not automatically translate to GOP candidates.

Bush has chosen not to test his popularity this fall, declining to campaign for either Mark Earley, the GOP candidate for governor of Virginia, or Bret Schundler, the Republican candidate for governor of New Jersey, to concentrate on the war. Next year he is likely to be much more directly involved on behalf of candidates, but depending on the conduct of the military campaign, this could present problems.

"Sometimes a president's popularity can be converted into political capital," said Ken Khachigian, a California GOP strategist. "But he'll have to calculate very carefully how to use that coin. There's a mystique to the presidency and you can't squander it."

Bush's strength depends on progress in the military campaign against Osama bin Laden's terrorist network and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and on how effectively the government deals with the threat of further terrorist attacks. Polls show that people believe it will take considerable time to accomplish those objectives, but *strategists said Bush will have to* show clear successes on both fronts to maintain strong public support.

Both the domestic and international aspects of the war initially play to Republican advantage, given the party's historic image as pro-defense and pro-law enforcement. Democrats argue that the war on terrorism, like the war on drugs, has no great partisan impact on voters. Some polls have shown an initial boost for the GOP since Sept. 11, and an agenda dominated by those issues would be favorable to Republicans.

What worries Republicans most is the threat of an extended recession, the very problem that sunk Bush's father after the Persian Gulf War. Bush has been more responsive to the economy than was his father, but GOP strategists fear their candidates could be running *next year with terrorism issues less* dominant than they are today but the economy still in trouble.

"People are really worried about it [the economy]," said Tim Hibbits, an Oregon-based independent pollster. "People are behaving as if they expect serious trouble." But he said the current slump is different from the recession of a decade ago. "Then [voters] were angry," he said. "That's when you got a wave of term limits being passed. Now people perceive a broader, longer downturn, and they are looking to government for help."

Strategists in both parties are trying to determine how Sept. 11 may affect the qualities voters are looking for in candidates. Linda DiVall, a Republican pollster, said the new climate favors people with experience, either in government, business or elsewhere, that demonstrates the capacity to build coalitions and make things work more than outsiders like "the Ross Perot type who exudes the mentality of an excitable charger who will take on the system."

Ed Sarpolus, a Michigan-based Democratic pollster, said, "What I see is that Giuliani is now the picture of what people want to see in leadership. He gives you a sense of security and honesty all at once."

Others believe the heroism of firefighters, police and rescue workers could bring working middle-class candidates into race particularly at the local level.

Political strategists and pollsters agree that the aftermath of Sept. 11 already has reshaped American politics in some significant ways, producing newfound confidence in government, driving the weakened economy into recession and putting national and domestic security at the forefront of the issue agenda.

All of these changes are likely to shape next year's elections, which could alter the partisan balance of power in Washington. But so far, the changes have had more impact on the culture of politics than on the relative strength of either political party.

Elaine Kamarck, a Harvard professor and Democratic strategist, said the changes "are so big and transforming [that] the new world *is going to affect both parties* equally."

Former Clinton White House chief of staff Leon E. Panetta said, "This is no longer about partisan trench warfare, which has been dominant for 20 years. Politics is no longer about abortion or gun control or even the minimum wage. It really is about personal security and survival. This is now a time of bipartisanship and seeking solutions."

That doesn't mean the absence of partisanship or vigorous debate, as congressional fights over aviation security and economic stimulus have shown. Nor does it mean the disappearance of issues such as education, health care, prescription drugs or the future of Social Security. But for now all politics will play out under altered rules of engagement. Whether that is the case a year from now is only a guess.

Matthew Dowd, one of Bush's political advisers, said Sept. 11 "could be a defining moment that changes how people view politics, the parties and all that, but that's going to depend on the outcome" of the war and efforts to revive the economy. He added, "The tenor of campaigns will change to a degree and that's probably a lesson learned out of the races this year."

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