

The #Resistance is Important, But Moderates and Independents Will Determine 2017 Elections



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Some of the biggest tests of the post-2016 anti-Trump resistance effort will be the two November 2017 gubernatorial contests that come after the flurry of late spring/early summer special congressional elections. New Jersey and Virginia are the only two states that elect Governors the year after presidential elections, and they are often viewed as a time for the losing side to exact its political revenge. In fact, New Jersey has elected a Governor from the party opposite the President in every election from 1989 to 2013, and Virginia did the same from 1977 to 2009. Virginia Democrat Terry McAuliffe was the first candidate to break the state's streak in more than 30 years when he won in 2013, thanks to a strong campaign, an exceptionally weak opponent, and a 'bluing' Virginia.

A big reason why these two elections are uniquely important this cycle is that both states are a governor's mansion away from a state government trifecta—a state whose governor, state house majority, and state senate majority all belong to the same party. If Democrats win in New Jersey, they will almost certainly have what would be their seventh such

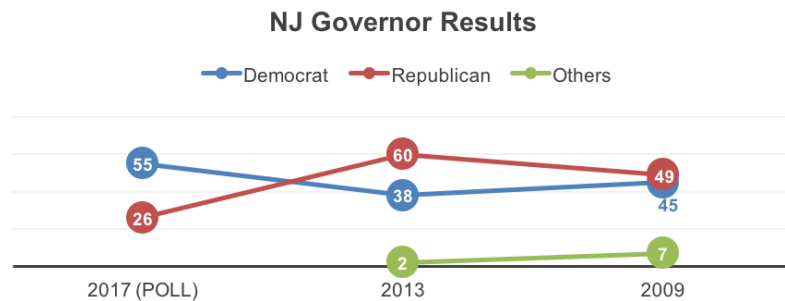
trifecta in the country. If Republicans win in Virginia, they could create their 26th. And while liberals make up a large (and loud) contingent of the anti-Trump resistance, to win these two elections Democrats must carve a wide path. Victory simply will not be possible without winning over moderates—many of whom are Democrats—and Independents. The good news for the left is that public polling suggests the Democratic gubernatorial candidates are on track to do just that in both New Jersey and Virginia.

New Jersey has a reputation as a fairly reliably Democratic state. It hasn't voted for a Republican for President since 1988 or for Senate since 1972. However, in gubernatorial elections, Republicans have been much more successful, winning six of the past nine.

This is because the state's voters aren't actually majority Democratic or majority liberal. While self-described Democratic voters are the biggest group, the electorate that Republican Governor Chris Christie won twice was about 40% Democratic, 30% Republican, and 30% Independent. In fact, self-described liberals were the smallest ideological voting bloc in both of the last two gubernatorial elections, clocking in at only 25% of voters. Self-described moderates, on the other hand, were by far the largest, accounting for 45% of the electorate in 2009 and 49% in 2013. That means neither party can win statewide in New Jersey without wooing a heck of a lot of Independent and moderate voters.¹

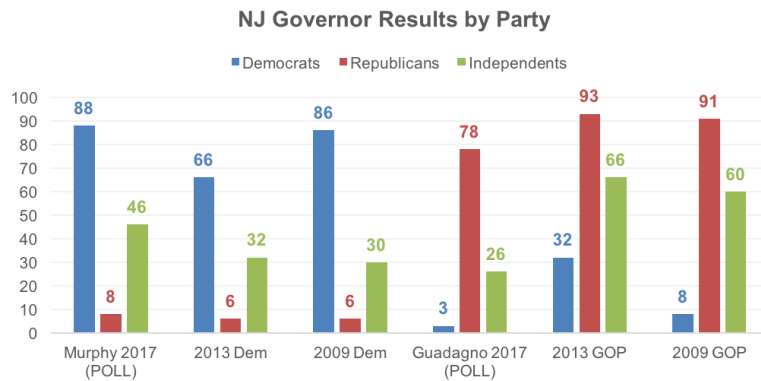
So how is the race looking on those metrics this year? Quinnipiac is the only pollster to have released public polling data on this year's New Jersey general election between former Ambassador Phil Murphy (D) and Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno (R). Its June 2017 poll found Murphy leading 55% to 26%—a massive reversal from Christie's 60%-to-38% blowout win just four years ago. Though Quinnipiac did not release the ideological breakdown of the voters in its poll, it did look at party identification and found that Murphy is significantly outperforming the 2009 and 2013 Democratic candidates among Independents. Murphy

leads among that group by 20 points, while the two previous Democratic nominees lost them by 30 and 34 points respectively. Murphy's polling numbers among Democratic and Republican voters align with the previous election result in 2009 when the Democrat lost by 4 points overall. That means it's that improvement in Independent support that's responsible for his polling at 55%, while the 2009 Democratic nominee received only 45% of the total vote.



Source: CNN Exit Polls – New Jersey Governor

Another way of looking at the importance of the center is by tracking moderate voters, who Democrats typically need to win as they start with fewer liberals in their base than Republicans have conservatives. And New Jersey Democrats didn't just lose the gubernatorial elections in 2009 and 2013—they also lost moderates. In both elections, moderates mirrored the final results by no more than a 2-point difference. While we don't have crosstabs for ideology from the Quinnipiac poll, the path to victory undoubtedly runs through these same moderates this year. Even if Murphy does as well among conservatives as his Democratic predecessors with about 15% support, and can get liberals to the 85%-90% range, he would *still* have to win moderates to win overall. It's clear that Murphy currently has an advantage heading into the November general election—and if he wins, it will be because of his success with Independent and moderate voters, not because he consolidated the liberal minority.

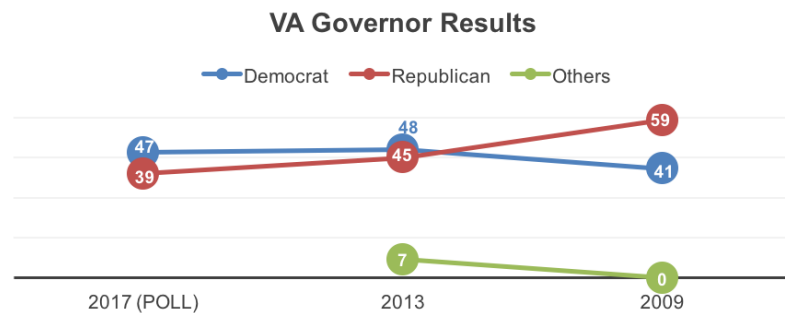


Source: CNN Exit Polls – New Jersey Governor

Two hundred and ninety-three miles to the south, moderates and Independents will also be key voters for Democrats in Virginia’s 2017 gubernatorial election—but that’s a whole different playing field. While New Jersey has long been more or less reliably Democratic, swing state Virginia is in the midst of an ideological evolution. Virginia was the only Southern state that did not send its electoral votes to Donald Trump in 2016, making it the third consecutive cycle in which Virginia voted Democratic for President. That’s a pretty significant change, considering it had gone red in every presidential election from 1952 to 2004 (with the exception of the 1964 LBJ landslide). The state’s last 12 Governors have been evenly divided between the parties, with six Democrats and six Republicans. And since the 1970s, Virginia’s delegation to the U.S. Senate has seen more years of bipartisan duos than single party control, though Democrats have more recently held both seats for nearly the last decade. Today, Virginia is home to one of the most rapidly-changing electorates of any state in the nation, and it shows in the types of coalitions needed to win state-wide elections.

Even as Virginia has begun to trend more Democratic, self-identified conservatives still vastly outnumber self-identified liberals. In 2009, there were double the amount of conservatives (40%) as there were liberals (18%) in the off-year electorate. Moderates barely edged out conservatives to be a plurality at 42%. That year, the Democratic and Republican nominees both got 91% of the vote of their respective ideological adherents and the Democrat was able

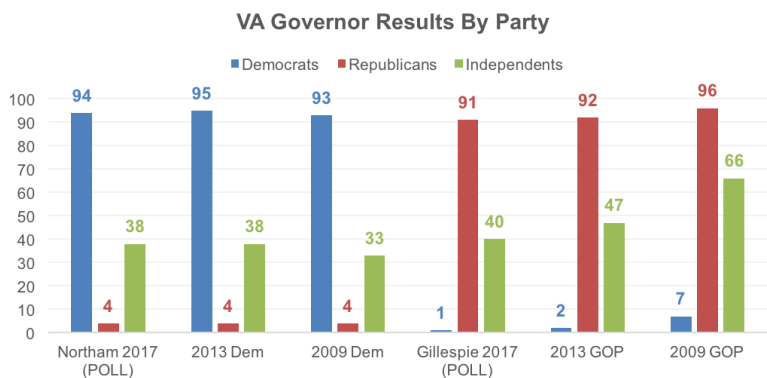
to eke out a 53%-to-47% win among moderates. But that wasn't enough—because of the large number of conservatives, the Republican nominee still won the election by 18 points overall. In 2013, the ideological gap closed slightly, with conservatives dropping to 36% of the electorate, moderates going up to 44%, and liberals increasing to 20%. Terry McAuliffe, the Democratic nominee, won the election that year not because he won 89% of liberals and 13% of conservatives, but because he won moderates by a substantial 22-point margin—56% to 34%. That 16-point shift in moderate support for Democrats from 2009 is what allowed him to narrowly win the election 48% to 45%. In Virginia, as in many states, it is abundantly clear that Democrats not only need to win moderates, but must *dominate* with them to overcome the conservative advantage in the state. ²



Source: CNN Exit Polls – Virginia Governor

Like in New Jersey, Quinnipiac released a gubernatorial election poll in Virginia in June that includes a breakdown by party affiliation. That poll showed Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam (D) leading Ed Gillespie (R) 47% to 39% thanks to his strong performance with Independents. Democrats overwhelmingly lost Virginia Independents in 2009 (by 33 points), and narrowly did so again in 2013 (by nine points). What saved Democrats in 2013 was shifting party alliances that led to Democrats outnumbering Republicans in the electorate—the opposite of what had previously been the case, and very much unlike New Jersey's steady partisan breakdown as discussed above. The combination of closing the gap with Independents and the changing ratio of Democrats to Republicans allowed the 2013 Democratic

nominee to win by a mere three points. Since this year, Northam has not only consolidated the Democratic base (with 94% supporting him) but is only losing Independents by two points, things are looking good for Democrats in November. But with 22% of Virginia Independents still undecided, it's critical that his campaign continue to speak to those key Independent and moderate voters if they want to win.



Source: CNN Exit Polls – Virginia Governor

Democrats need their base of self-identified liberals and Democrats, but if they also win moderates and Independents in New Jersey and Virginia this year, they can't lose. Both Murphy and Northam are set to deliver two very critical wins to the party at a time when it needs it most. But it shouldn't be lost that these victories, should they come to pass, will be because Democrats blazed a wide path, expanding the party's share of the electorate by persuading voters in the middle.

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END NOTES

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