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In 1997, GOP Wins Spun as Happiness with Clinton's Status Quo; Now Reporters See Anti-Bush Anger

Media's Post-Election Spin Favors Democrats

Democrats won yesterday's gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia, both offices they held going into Tuesday's voting. But journalists today spun the results like Howard Dean, claiming voters had handed the Republicans "stinging defeats," as the *New York Times* hyped in a front-page subheadline.

Times reporter Robin Toner touted "Democratic euphoria over what was perceived as a shifting electoral tide." (See box.) But the only actual shift yesterday went against the Democrats, who lost the lieutenant governor's office in Virginia to a Republican, state senator Bill Bolling.

NBC's Katie Couric joined the *Times* in seeing a repudiation of Bush: "Good morning. Clean sweep. Democrats win the governors races in Virginia and New Jersey. Are President Bush's second-term troubles to blame?"

On ABC's *Good Morning America*, George Stephanopoulos found great meaning in Tim Kaine's win in Virginia: "The surprise was probably the margin of the Democrats' victory in Virginia. And that's the one that all the political pros are going to be looking to for national implications. Virginia is a red state. President Bush won there handily twice. He actually went and campaigned for the losing candidate, Jerry Kilgore, on Monday night."

Stephanopoulos also linked the results with Bush's unpopularity. After reciting the White House reaction to the election results, he warned: "If President Bush does not get his poll numbers up above this 35, 36 level where they are right now by next year's mid-term elections, Republicans could have an even worse night a year from now." But

Democrats won in Virginia (and New Jersey) four years ago when Bush's approval rating was 89 percent.

Eight years ago, at the same point in Bill Clinton's second term, Republicans maintained their control of the same governorships that were up for grabs yesterday. But the media refused to make those Democratic defeats a referendum on the Democratic President. Rather than branding them as "stinging defeats," *New York Times*

reporter Richard Berke determined the GOP victories were really a triumph for Clinton's post-ideological approach. (See box.)

On TV, the message was the same. On the November 5, 1997 *Today*, NBC's Gwen Ifill declared everybody a winner: "Most voters across the country opted for more of the same once they got to their polling booths. And with the economy on a roll, more of the same appears to feel pretty good." On *Good Morning America*, ABC reporter Ann Compton claimed the vote reflected satisfaction with the status quo: "The President's own personal popularity has remained at a fairly high level," she pointed out, and "Democrats suggest that the Clinton economy is just so good that the incumbents won and people voted for the status quo."

Yesterday's vote also merely reinforced the "status quo," but the media preferred to see a repudiation of Bush.

— Rich Noyes

Elections Mean More When GOP Loses

"After months of sagging poll ratings, scandal and general political unrest, the Republicans badly needed some good news in Tuesday's election for governor. What they got instead was a clear-cut loss in a red state, and an expected but still painful defeat in a blue one."

— Reporter Robin Toner on the significance of yesterday's elections, *New York Times*, Nov. 9.

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"The success of narrow pocketbook issues is a nod to the strategy perfected by President Clinton in last year's election, when he seized on small but powerfully symbolic issues like school uniforms. It also reflects the waning of ideology in today's politics; it is a time when both parties are struggling to come up with defining issues."

— New York Times reporter Richard Berke after GOP gubernatorial victories in New Jersey and Virginia, November 6, 1997 article.

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