

GOP Gains Across U.S., But Not Here

BY JACK NEWFIELD

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The Republican Party made gains all over the country on Election Day, except in New York.

Here, the Democratic Party has been in the ascendancy since 1998, when Chuck Schumer unseated Senator D'Amato and Eliot Spitzer was elected attorney general, ousting Dennis Vacco.

In 2000, Hillary Clinton crushed Rick Lazio to claim Senator Moynihan's open seat.

This year, the Democrats gained three seats in the state Senate, with a recount continuing in Westchester for a fourth Republican-held seat.

This year's election also showed the effectiveness and grassroots organizing skills of the Working Families Party, the infantry of the Democrats in selected precincts.

A lot of this Democratic growth is the destiny of demographics - steady shifts in population. Latino immigrants are moving into the suburbs, as are many working-class blacks, and the near suburbs are starting to trend Democratic. There are Democratic county executives in both Nassau and Suffolk counties now, and Nassau's Tom Suozzi is becoming a major force with his Fix Albany campaign. Tim Bishop was elected to Congress from Suffolk in 2002.

A huge factor enhancing the future of the Democrats was Chuck Schumer's decision to remain in the Senate and not run for governor. That was a generous decision by a talented and ambitious officeholder stuck in the Senate minority. Mr. Schumer is a mensch.

His decision created a carnival-like party unity and opened the way for Eliot Spitzer to run for governor in 2006, as he announced yesterday he is doing. Mr. Spitzer enters the contest as the favorite, with plenty of financing, very high popularity, and a reputation for fighting corporate pirates on behalf of small investors and the middle class.

The problem for the Republicans is that they have no bench, no rising stars in the Legislature or in the Bloomberg administration.

All they have are Governor Pataki and Rudy Giuliani. But the voters seem tired of Mr. Pataki, and Mr. Giuliani seems more intent on making money and perhaps running directly for president in 2008.

And Senator Clinton, already running hard for re-election in 2006, will profit from the GOP's empty bench - unless Mr. Giuliani or Mr. Pataki decides to challenge her.

The GOP candidate vacuum is what that millionaire Tom Golisano wants to fill - and the GOP party chairman, Stephen Minarik, is sounding receptive. "I would consider anyone who could bring \$100 million to the table," Mr. Minarik said.

The impediment to that idea is that Mr. Golisano has run three times against Mr. Pataki as an independent, and a spoiler, using harsh language and angering the GOP's base of voters and elected officials. A GOP state senator on Long Island, Michael Balboni, has already blasted away at a Golisano trial balloon, and many Republicans are furious at their state chairman's favorable response.

Mr. Golisano, who spent \$70 million against Mr. Pataki in 2002, has become a new cause of factionalism within the GOP. He is not now a registered Republican. In 2002, he kept attacking Mr. Pataki for the state's high deficits and the fact that the state budget has annually been late in the past two decades.

That does give him an early marker in the "Albany is broken" campaign, which has gained momentum the last year.

For now, though, Mr. Spitzer and Mrs. Clinton seem in strong position for 2006. The upstate economy is still not producing jobs after 10 years of Mr. Pataki. Democrats are fired up after losing to President Bush. Whom will the GOP run against them?

And Democrats in the state Senate already have two more seats targeted for 2006. They think they can finally beat 83-year-old John Marchi on Staten Island, and Mr. Balboni says he is going to run for attorney general in 2006, which would open up his seat, for which the Democrats are already recruiting a candidate.

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