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ELECTION 2018: THE VOTERS HAVE SPOKEN

But what did they say about education?

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11/27/2018e



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Election 2018 is over and the postmortems are underway. How did education factor into the results? Was it a decisive issue for voters, relative to other concerns? What might voters have been trying to signal about their positions on a host of education policies?

The answers to these questions might in turn help inform forecasts about what is on the policymaking horizon—which current policies might be continued, and which jettisoned, and what major new initiatives elected officials might be expected to pursue.

It's tempting to draw broad conclusions about the messages voters were trying to send to candidates via the ballot box. The dominant narrative right now within the education social-media bubble is that this election was a repudiation of education reform, or at least its "hardest edges," in the words of those staking this claim. But when one looks closely at the election outcomes, the most compelling conclusion is much less dramatic: that there are no big takeaways, and the results don't necessarily say a lot about where voters stand on education issues.

This scenario might have been foreseen, because very few pre-election polls indicated that education was a top issue for voters. Only Democrats ranked education among their three highest priorities and, even then, not in every poll. Not even close. The economy and jobs, health care, gun control, and security tended to outrank education for every group of voters, Democratic, Republican, and independent.

What's more, in this tight election year, most candidates, especially those running statewide, needed to attract independents and Republicans in order to win. Thus, even Democrats, especially those in tight races, may have chosen to discuss issues that were of most concern to those two segments of voters, and that list does not include education.

WHAT WERE THE VOTERS SAYING?

Now that the votes are in, it's clear that for nearly every electoral victory that purportedly signifies voter preference in one direction, there is another win indicating the opposite.

For example, some have pointed to Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham's gubernatorial victory in New Mexico as a repudiation of the incumbent Republican Susana Martinez's "hard-edged" education policies, especially the state's teacher-evaluation system, which Grisham did campaign on eliminating. (I'm a bit mystified that education-policy experts portray as radical or extreme a system in which professionals are evaluated on their performance using multiple measures, something that is routine in most sectors outside education.)

In contrast to that race, there were plenty of others in which candidates who support robust teacher-evaluation policies won decisively. These polls include the incumbent governor of New York, Democrat Andrew Cuomo, who took office after the state adopted its teacher-evaluation system but who vigorously defended it. This year, Cuomo beat back a primary challenge in a race where, unlike the one in New Mexico, education was a central issue and Cuomo's opponent was much more closely aligned with the status quo.

Similarly, Democratic congressman Jared Polis who, like Cuomo, was challenged in the primaries for his education positions, will be the next governor of Colorado, despite having been the coauthor of the STELLAR Act of 2013, a bill that tracked closely with and arguably influenced the teacher-evaluation policies of President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, as well as those of New Mexico's Martinez. Washington, D.C.'s, teacher-evaluation system, which is more consequential than that of any state, was a nonissue this year in this city's school-board elections. On the Republican side, Bill Lee handily won Tennessee's governorship. In doing so, he maintained party control in a place that, like New Mexico and D.C., is seen as having one of the most rigorous teacher-evaluation systems in the nation, which was supported by his immediate predecessor, Republican Bill Haslam, and was launched by Haslam's predecessor, Democrat Phil Bredesen.

On school choice, we see similar examples of winners on all sides of the issue. Both Cuomo and Polis, for example, are also staunch advocates for public-school choice, especially public charter schools. In California, Democrat Gavin Newsom won the gubernatorial contest with a platform that included a charter-school moratorium, while four-term Senator Dianne Feinstein, who has a long history of advocating not only for public charter schools but also private-school vouchers, fended off challenges from the left in both the primary and the general election.

Among Republicans, decades of Republican support for a variety of school-choice policies, public and private, will continue under Governor-Elect Ron DeSantis in Florida. The opposition of Democratic challenger Andrew Gillum to private-school vouchers and public charter schools did not attract enough voters to sway the contest in his favor, though DeSantis won by only a razor-thin margin.

Again, none of this is meant to convey that voters elected or defeated any of the above candidates—or any of hundreds of others—based on their positions on issues that generate intense debate among the education chattering class. Rather, the point is that readers should resist glib and sweeping explanations of what the election results mean. Instead, they need to tackle on their own the admittedly harder and less sexy work of analysis and interpretation, taking into account both the big picture and the particularities of candidates, and the state and local ecologies of the voters who made their choices on November 6.

GOING FORWARD

Similarly, one should resist facile prognostications regarding both education policy and politics. One predominant view that has emerged already is that the politics will become more partisan. This interpretation is understandable. Going into the elections, the two parties shared control of the legislature in four states—Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, and New York. All four of those legislatures are now controlled by Democrats. And as of January, only one state legislature, Minnesota, will have split-party control.

Yet there are some checks and balances in place. Twelve states with unified party control will have governors of the other party, and in two of the key states where legislatures flipped to Democratic control, the Democratic governors, Polis in Colorado and Cuomo in New York, have, as noted above, track records of political independence when it comes to education. Polis, who will govern in a state that is perhaps a slightly bluer shade of purple, has reached out to members of both parties to help his transition team.

At the federal level, we may actually see *more* bipartisanship. With Democrats now holding a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, one predominant view is that we should expect to see more partisan rancor and a lot of hearings in which committee chairs drag administration officials before Congress to face intense scrutiny for policies they've advanced that are, to say the least, unpopular with Democrats.

However, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, the chair-to-be of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Committee, Bobby Scott of Virginia, signaled a different path forward. Scott *does* plan to probe administration policies in areas where his caucus has serious concerns, including civil rights issues and oversight of predatory, for-profit colleges. At least initially, however, he plans to do so not through public confrontations in committee hearings but via a more deliberate and diplomatic path of written inquiry.

“You don’t need somebody testifying if you have the answers you requested,” Scott told education reporter Laura Meckler. “I would expect when we have questions, we’ll get answers.” Added Denise Forte, who was a

top aide to Scott for 20 years, “People are looking for wins and gotchas. Bobby Scott is not a gotcha guy.” Interestingly, education secretary DeVos’s team seemed to embrace these overtures. Meckler reported that “Elizabeth Hill, an Education Department spokeswoman, said her agency will ‘certainly be responsive’ to Democratic oversight efforts.”

Nor does Scott see the election as a mandate for education policies “such as free college for all,” supported by Bernie Sanders and other prominent liberals. Scott’s goal is a bipartisan reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and his starting point is the “Aim Higher” bill that he and other prominent Democrats introduced in the summer. While the bill would provide incentives for states to make community college tuition-free and would boost funding for federal student-aid programs that serve low-income students, especially Pell Grants, it falls well short of the massive expansion of federal policy and spending that Sanders and others have touted. There’s a path to bipartisanship here that is at least as likely to be followed as that in 2015, another odd-numbered year preceding a presidential election, when Scott and the Republican House education chairman John Kline joined with Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee chair Lamar Alexander and his Democratic counterpart Patty Murray, both of whom will continue in their current roles, to pass the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Readers should bear in mind that, especially when it comes to education, prognosticating is more art than science. Truth be told, the experts quite often turn out to be wrong. Ten years ago at this time, the “Ed in ’08” effort by philanthropists Bill Gates and Eli Broad to make education a top issue in that pivotal election year was considered an abject failure. And yet the period that followed, whatever one thinks of the merits and the relative successes and failures, was one of the most dynamic eras of education policymaking, at all levels of government, that this country had seen in almost half a century. A number of reforms, such as busting charter-school caps and implementing new teacher-evaluation policies in Colorado, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, happened during that time.

Going forward, maybe we need to accept that after such an amazing run of dynamic change, a cooling-off period is an inevitable part of the policymaking cycle, but there are other, equally valid views. One is that the current pessimism about big change in the immediate future derives from the fact that a consensus no longer exists around easy-to-message, cookie-cutter policies that dominated over the past decade: Common Core standards; teacher evaluation; last-in, first-out personnel policies; charter schools; private-school choice; and a handful of others.

In other words, caution is warranted in prognosticating around the next generation of education policies just as it is with over-interpreting the results of the 2018 elections. Fatalism and groupthink are highly maladaptive mindsets for those who share the opinion that our education system still is not everything it needs to be. Advocates need to eschew simplistic analyses of the problem and paint-by-number solutions. Moreover, they need to understand that nothing is predetermined. Those who still see the need for massive change in education might do best to rely less heavily on the opinions of a handful of high-profile talkers, and spend more time finding creative consensus among the vast array of under-recognized doers.

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