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5 on 45: What Democratic election victories mean for 2018

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CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

JOHN HUDAK

Deputy Director, Center for Effective Public Management

Senior Fellow, Governance Studies

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

HUDAK: I'm John Hudak, and I'm a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. In last night's elections the Democratic Party showed the strength that it had been missing for some time. After a surprise loss of the presidency in 2016 that ushered Donald Trump into the White House, Democrats nervously awaited election results in Virginia, New Jersey, and a variety of big city's mayors' races across the country.

The result was unexpected wins for Democrats in many races. In Virginia, Democrat Ralph Northam easily defeated Republican Ed Gillespie by nine percentage points in a governor's race that many expected to be much closer. As expected, New Jersey Democrat Phil Murphy defeated Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno to succeed the historically unpopular and scandal plagued Governor Chris Christie. These governor's races were seen in the media as harbingers for party strength moving into the 2018 midterms, I disagree.

Parties can win off-year governors races without a real sense of what the party is doing or where it's going in the future. However, there is no doubt that Donald Trump's unpopularity played a role last night. Among Virginia voters, Trump carried an approval rating of only 42 percent. In New Jersey it was worse. There, the president's job approval rating stood at 33 percent. Numbers like that make it harder for a Republican gubernatorial candidate to win under such an unpopular Republican president.

While all the eyes were on the governor's races last night, what happened down ballot may be of greater interest to the strength of the Democratic Party. It appears Democrats are poised to gain control of the Virginia House of Delegates, a feat few thought possible before last night. Democrats held just 34 of the 100 seats in the chamber, and while they were expected to pick up several seats majority control seemed out of reach. However, several incumbent Republicans were defeated by Democrats in a variety of areas of Virginia. This includes one race where the nation's

first transgender individual was elected to a state legislature. She beat a longtime incumbent Republican who described himself as Virginia's "chief homophobe."

The size and scale of Democratic gains were surprising especially in areas where Republicans previously performed significantly well. The outcome suggests the Democratic resistance movement and efforts to expand the number of candidates competing across the country even in non-traditionally Democratic areas may significantly shape electoral maps moving forward.

Ultimately election night 2018 may look very different than election night 2017. However, with an unpopular president, a stalled legislative agenda, a period of gridlock for a party that controls all three branches of the federal government, Republicans have to be waking up today worried about what their short term political future holds.

And if you're a Democrat you shouldn't assume anything about next year's elections, but at a minimum the Democratic Party of Virginia offered a guide book last night about how to win in this new political environment.

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