

Can Republicans turn back the Blue tide in NM?

For most of the 20th century, New Mexican voters have put their X on the Democrat side of the ballot for Governor. And what have they got in return for placing their confidence and their vote in the party of the donkey? Answer: failing grades on the state's economy, education, safety and security, jobs, taxes, and most of all...opportunity. You'd think that that reality would be sufficient to change enough hearts, minds and votes of the average New Mexican, but it hasn't. Just six Republicans have governed the state during the last sixty years (Edwin Mechem, Tom Bolak, David Cargo, Garrey Carruthers, Gary Johnson and Susana Martinez) while only five Republicans preceded them from the time of New Mexico's transition to statehood in 1912. That's 11 Republicans out of 32!

Democrats have had a firm grip on New Mexico's top job for 2/3 of the state's century-plus history of governors and for many of its other elected offices like the mayorships of its top cities in Albuquerque and Santa Fe not to mention the prestigious positions in the nation's Congress and the Senate. The numbers of registered voters in NM do not on their face portend future victories for Republicans. Democrats outnumber Republicans 45% (611K) to 31% (426K) with unaffiliated voters clocking in at nearly 22% (296K). The last Republican Governor, Susana Martinez, paved the way for a female governor by winning her race in 2010 and managed to secure herself a second term, but many Democrats (and Republicans as well) would argue that her unconvincing management of the state cost the NMGOP the possibility of another governorship for the foreseeable future. New Mexico's *bluing* has definitely been influenced by the political schism that has split the country as a whole, along with a Republican population loss in rural parts of the state, a movement and concentration of Democrats to New Mexico's urban centers and the new 'wild card' - the influx of Democrat 'transplants' from California who've taken up residence in the state.

But that's just the raw numbers, and they don't completely explain the underlying reasons New Mexicans continue to vote Democrat. One of the principal ones can be attributed to strong New Mexican family voting traditions especially among Hispanics that make up the majority of the state's population. Sons and daughters follow their parents down the Democrat path, election after election. Another is the bloated state, county and municipal government workforce that depends on Democrat administrations for their employment. Many workers, understandably, yield to 'soft' pressure to support their Democrat employer by voting them into office and keeping them there. Then there is the aging and rapidly dwindling voter demographic of the Greatest Generation and Baby Boomers, many of whom are conservative Republicans. Finally, there is the Republican Party, itself, which has failed to compete successfully in the arena of ideas and recruit marketable candidates capable of appealing not only to the Republican base but also to those unaffiliated voters and possible crossover Democrats.

Of considerable and ongoing concern to the Party is the small universe of wealthy potential donors who could be persuaded to support Republican candidates whose chances of winning in Democrat-dominated districts are iffy at best. Many of the 'old guard' political donors that the Party has relied on in the past have been burned too many times and are gun shy, making money-raising nearly impossible without out-of-state help. The winning formula to win a race in New Mexico today is: finding a competitive seat with a beatable incumbent (like New Mexico's current Governor who has over-managed the Covid-19 crisis causing the demise of hundreds of small businesses and the loss of thousands of jobs), a sufficiently large base of Republican party voters plus enough persuadable unaffiliated voters and disgruntled Democrat voters, a sound 'third way' candidate PLUS a bag full of money. If Republicans are smart, they will need to check all of those boxes, take nothing for granted and leave false hope and illusions in their foot locker and should not - repeat not - raise the white flag of surrender before even joining the battle for governor in 2022.

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics. He operates a political news story aggregator website, www.projectpushback.com. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com