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Analysis



Protesters gather to denounce President Donald Trump's behavior and policies during a "No Kings" rally in Miller Place, N.Y., Oct. 18, 2025. Similar demonstrations took place throughout the day in cities and towns across the nation, drawing millions of participants. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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Off-year elections can be over-interpreted. Normally, local issues can sway the electorate in a particular direction that tells us nothing about the national landscape. Or a candidate underperforms or makes a bad gaffe and the results shed little light beyond that one race.

This is no normal time. President Donald Trump dominates the political landscape the way Ronald Reagan did in the 1980s and Franklin Delano Roosevelt did in the 1930s and 40s. If local politics occasionally lands above the fold, it has to share that space with Trump. The nightly news almost always leads with something the president said or did. And, so, this year's three major contests — the governors' races in New Jersey and Virginia, and the mayorship of New York City — were conducted in the shadow of Trump and the results can be properly interpreted as a referendum on the president.

In all three contests, Trump lost.



U.S. President Donald Trump holds up an executive order he signed to rename the Department of Defense the "Department of War," accompanied by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington Sept. 5, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

In New Jersey, Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill, a former Navy helicopter pilot, won the governor's race — the first time in 20 years the Democrats have held onto the governorship for three consecutive elections in the state. More importantly, the race was far less close than pre-election polls anticipated, with Sherrill garnering 56% of the vote to Republican candidate Jack Ciattarelli's 43% with 75% of the vote counted.

The Commonwealth of Virginia elected Democratic Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger by more than 10 points. Not since 2009 has a gubernatorial candidate won by double digits in the Old Dominion, but Spanberger benefitted from voter anger over the government shutdown which is strongly affecting the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C.

New York City's mayoral election catapulted Zohran Mamdani into the mayor's office as he defeated both fellow Democrat and former Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa. Mamdani is close to securing a majority of the electorate in the three-way race, and the president's last-minute endorsement of Cuomo was not enough to propel the former governor into the mayor's office.

The gubernatorial races in New Jersey and Virginia usually lean against the party of the president. Buyers' remorse has set in and voters in these two states can register their dissatisfaction. Four years ago in New Jersey, during President Joe Biden's first year in office, incumbent Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy narrowly beat Ciattarelli by a margin of 51.2% to 48%. Four years earlier, Murphy trounced the GOP nominee Kim Guadagno 56% to 41.9% in a race conducted during Trump's first year as president.



A woman fills out her ballot at an early voting station in Green Bay, Wis., March 19, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Eric Cox)

One of the big questions going into this year's contest was whether or not Trump's markedly improved performance in New Jersey last year would be passed along to

Ciattarelli. In 2016, Trump only took 41% of the vote, compared to Hillary Clinton's 54.99%. In 2020, Trump captured 41.25%, but Biden won with 57.14% of the vote. Last year, Kamala Harris won the state but Trump closed the gap, winning 45.9% of the vote to Harris' 51.78%, and flipping five counties he had lost in 2020. Ciattarelli did not continue to close the gap for the GOP, and the five counties Trump flipped last year flipped back into the Democratic column.

Virginia is the only state in the nation that limits its governors to a single term in office. It is also unique in that some of the nation's most prominent founding fathers served as governor: Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe.

Unlike New Jersey, Trump's share of the vote totals has been largely even in all three contests: 44.43% in 2016, 44% in 2020, and 46.05% in 2024. Virginia, however, follows New Jersey in boosting the chances of the party that lost the previous year's presidential election. In 2017, Democrat Ralph Northam cruised to victory running as much against Trump as against Republican candidate Ed Gillespie, 53.9% to 45%. In 2021, Republican Glenn Youngkin won the governor's mansion back for the GOP in Biden's first year, defeating Democrat Terry McAuliffe 50.6% to 48.7%.

Spanberger, a former CIA agent, got her political start winning a magenta congressional district in 2018, running as a “national security Mom” and she has continued to burnish her moderate credentials. She began her acceptance speech, “My fellow Virginians, tonight we sent a message … We sent a message to the whole world, that in 2025, Virginia chose pragmatism over partisanship. We chose our commonwealth over chaos.”

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New York City is not like other jurisdictions. Self-identified democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani ran a fun campaign that focused heavily on the cost of living, and he handily won July's Democratic primary with 43.8% of the vote to former Gov. Andrew Cuomo's 36.1%. In the ranked choice results, Mamdani captured a majority: 56.4% to Cuomo's 43.6%. Since then, the entire contest has been about Mamdani. In addition to embracing the label of socialist, Mamdani made regrettable comments about Israel, which he had to recalibrate in the weeks before the primary.

Republicans have been trying to make Mamdani the face of the Democratic Party. They neglect to mention that Republican Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia ran for Congress as a socialist too! There is some bigotry at work here too: In addition to being a socialist, Mamdani is a Muslim.

Still, it is difficult to see whether or not the GOP will succeed in their effort to paint the entire Democratic Party as a reflection of Mamdani's positions. The two newly elected governors ran as moderates. Much will depend on the degree to which the new mayor succeeds in addressing the cost of living as he has promised. More importantly, Democrats in other, more conservative parts of the country will have little difficulty distinguishing themselves from Mamdani. Perhaps some college towns will elect self-identified socialists, but the label is too easy to demagogue in most of the country.

In the three most prominent races in the country, the Democrats not only won, but did better than expected. The president will, as is his wont, vacillate between denial and blaming others for the losses. The question is how congressional Republicans will react. Trump’s coattails could not carry any of the GOP’s candidates across the finish line. As they look ahead to next year’s midterms, a lot of Republican members of Congress are wondering if the Democratic tide that just came in will have flowed out in the new year, and whether there is anything they can do to stem the anti-Trump sentiment that manifested itself so clearly in New York City, New Jersey and Virginia.