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Dissatisfaction upstate could hurt NY Democrats

Monday, October 11, 2010

By Carolyn Thompson and Michael Hill

The Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Ken Streebel is not happy with the direction New York is headed.

"No way," said the 61-year-old maintenance mechanic from suburban Hamburg. "Taxes are too expensive, my wife's been out of work for 2 1/2 years: one, because there's no jobs but two, because we're in our 60s, she can't get a job." He says before his wife lost her job, he was out of work for more than 4 years.

Streebel is a registered Democrat who plans to vote for Republican Carl Paladino for governor. He's an illustration of why New York Democrats could have a tougher time piling up wide margins of victory among upstate voters this November than previous elections.

In a year when voters are unhappy around the country, upstate residents appear especially restless. That could chip into votes for Democrats, who hold both U.S. Senate seats, the governor's mansion and offices of the state attorney general and comptroller.

The phenomenon is personified by Paladino, the Buffalo developer who built his campaign on anger at Albany politicians. But it goes deeper than that. A recent poll shows voter dissatisfaction especially sharp in upstate New York, an area that has long endured job and population losses.

"Something's got to be done about this state," Streebel said on a smoke break from his job.

Democrats outnumber Republicans statewide by about 2-to-1. Analysts typically break up New York's electorate into three regions: New York City, the Democrats' power base; the suburban vote from Long Island and the city's northern suburbs, typically a swing area; and upstate.

Democrats running statewide used to rely on racking up big leads downstate to make up for any deficits in more conservative areas upstate. But upstate is no longer a Republican stronghold. In 2006, Democrat Eliot Spitzer won 60 percent of the upstate vote in his run for governor. Hillary Rodham Clinton won 57 percent of the upstate vote in her Senate run that same year. Cuomo, who won the attorney general's race in 2006, received a more modest 47 percent of the upstate vote.

Democrats also grabbed six upstate House seats from Republicans since 2006, helping the party gain 27 of the state's 29 seats.

While polls show Democratic candidates for governor and the two Senate seats in New York leading, one poll also suggests the Democrats' upstate edge might not be as strong this time.

A Marist College poll of likely voters from Sept. 30 showed Democrat Andrew Cuomo and Paladino running neck-and-neck upstate (though other polls have shown Paladino's overall support slipping since then). Another Marist poll found Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand with a statistically insignificant lead over Republican challenger Joe DioGuardi. Sen. Charles Schumer was up by seven points among upstate voters in that poll against Republican Jay Townsend.

"When the Democrats were winning big and running up the score, they were doing it with support of upstate voters. But that seems to have dissipated," said Marist pollster Lee Miringoff. "Right now, upstate voters are in a shopping-for-candidates mode, which is very different."

Marist pollsters also found the likely reason: 86 percent of registered upstate voters felt things were going in the wrong direction in New York state, a higher percentage than either New York City or the suburbs.

Parts of upstate were struggling well before the rest of the country fell into a recession. While there are pockets of economic growth in the Hudson Valley and elsewhere, the region also is home to old manufacturing hubs that are ghosts of their old, bustling selves. Unemployment rates in Buffalo and Rochester have edged over 10 percent in some months this year.

"For a long time, there's been a great deal of frustration in western New York," said James E. Campbell, chairman of the University of Buffalo's political science department. "We really never experienced some of the boom years that the rest of the nation felt, so I think with the recession since 2008, the frustration has been even greater."

While upstate accounts for 39 percent of the state's registered voters, the region usually accounts for between 46 percent to just under half of the total vote in gubernatorial elections, said Bruce Gyory, a political consultant and political science professor at the University at Albany. With slightly more Democrats than Republicans, Gyory calls upstate a swing region.

Not surprisingly, candidates are assuring voters they understand voter concerns upstate. Cuomo addressed upstate's economic woes in the policy book put out by his campaign. Gillibrand, raised in the Albany area, released a TV ad in which she tells the camera: "I was born and raised here in upstate New York. It's where my family and I still call home."

Democrats hope that they can press their enrollment advantage by energizing voters like Kathleen Sullivan, a 72-year-old retired teacher and registered Democrat from Buffalo. She calls the state Legislature "dysfunctional," but will vote for Cuomo and believes the country is headed in the right direction.

"The tea party scares me right now because you have people jumping on saying, 'Yes, get 'em all out of there,' and it's just so ill-informed or not informed at all. People just don't know what they're asking for."

Hill reported from Albany, N.Y.

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