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Lexington

A big win for John Kasich

Ohio's Republican governor puts results ahead of ideological purity

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WHAT is conservatism for? In the election campaign just past, too many Republicans ignored that question. Instead they went negative, harnessing the anger of voters who feel that America is going to ruin and have no faith in President Barack Obama. Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the canny Republican who will now lead the Senate, boiled down his pitch to a yell of revolt against Democrats as eco-warriors, liberal zealots and government bullies. Further distilled to fit on McConnell campaign bumper-stickers, this became: “Coal. Guns. Freedom.”



North of Kentucky in the swing state of Ohio, the Republican governor, John Kasich, secured re-election on November 4th with much duller bumper-stickers, bearing such slogans as “Kasich works.” No matter. He won by a staggering margin of 31 points.

Mr Kasich, who is 62, is proud of his conservative achievements: balancing a budget that faced an \$8 billion shortfall when he took office in 2011, cutting taxes and red tape to boost job-creation. He is prouder still of what prosperity enables him to do.

In the governor's telling, conservatism must have a moral purpose. Republicans should celebrate those who are successful—Americans do not hate the rich, they want to join them, he likes to say, quoting his late father, a postman. Conservatives should encourage those already on their way (he enthuses about job-training schemes and school reforms, and notes that Ohio is trying to steer more state contracts to non-white entrepreneurs). Lastly, a prosperous state should use its resources to help the weak—those who, in a favourite Kasich phrase, “live in the shadows”, including the mentally ill or drug addicts. He has worked to keep minor offenders out of prison and to help ex-inmates find jobs.

In a string of pre-election rallies he spent no time attacking Mr Obama—an extraordinary omission for a Republican. Instead he urged his fellow Republicans to canvass Democratic relatives and friends (at a rally near Lima this drew a “pshaw” of disdain from one activist). Mr Kasich can sound positively preacher-like, declaring: “When you die and go to heaven, I don't know that St Peter is going to ask, did you balance the budget? He is probably going to ask what you did for the least of those [around you].”

The governor's instincts remain thriftily conservative. As a member of Congress in the 1990s he spent years working towards a balanced federal budget. Along with Scott Walker in Wisconsin, Chris Christie in New Jersey and Rick Scott in Florida, he is one of a clutch of Republican governors, elected in battleground states that voted for Mr Obama in presidential elections, who then turned round, cut spending and picked fights with public-sector unions. Back in 2011—when 62% of Ohio voters rejected Mr Kasich's plan for union curbs in a crushing referendum defeat—he seemed the weakest of that pack.

But Mr Kasich learned from that debacle, taking pains to build broad coalitions for subsequent reforms. This has served him well. His more purist peers, such as Mr Walker and Mr Scott, also won this week—it was that kind of an election—but by much thinner margins. As for Mr Christie, he finds himself struggling to defend the ropery condition of New Jersey's finances. As the dust settles, Mr Kasich looks like a champion for pragmatism.

Not all on the right like Ohio's 2014 take on compassionate conservatism. Mr Kasich is under fire for accepting federal money to expand Medicaid, a government health scheme for the poor—both because it is a form of socialised medicine and because the expansion is part of the Obamacare health law (which Mr Kasich says he opposes as a “top-down” scheme that chills business investment and fails to control costs). Conservatives were indignant when Mr Kasich defended his actions as rooted in religious duty, complaining that he was calling them un-Christian.

Mr Kasich does not duck the fight. His critics seem to feel “guilty” about something, he ventures. He is unmoved by the charge that he cannot claim to oppose Obamacare as a whole while using one part of it. Why not, he asks? Sometimes “practicality” trumps the qualms of somebody who “lives in an ivory tower”, he says. Ronald Reagan expanded Medicaid, he notes. Theodore Roosevelt achieved great things: “Was he doctrinaire?”

Looking for what works

Ohio's governor is more interested in conservative ends than means. Aides researched the idea of creating private health-insurance for the poorest, for instance, but concluded that government control (ie, Medicaid) would be cheaper. Such pragmatism chimes with voters' preferences. Many in Ohio, as elsewhere, resent Obamacare as a form of mandatory redistribution, from the solvent and healthy to the sick and hard-up. Yet a majority backs public health cover for the very poorest. It is “cool” that the governor expanded Medicaid, enthuses Everett Woodard II, a voter at a rally near Toledo who supports both Mr Obama and Mr Kasich. Society should support those who are “in need, but who aren't trying to milk the government”, says Mr Woodard.

Mr Kasich's cruise to re-election has involved some luck: the campaign of his Democratic opponent imploded after a series of gaffes. But political luck rarely occurs in a vacuum. Had the governor looked vulnerable, he might have drawn a stronger rival.

Mr Kasich is no centrist. He opposes abortion and gay marriage and has cosied up to the National Rifle Association. He approved a Republican-friendly gerrymandering of Ohio's congressional districts. He can be curmudgeonly: at a Dayton rally he started fretting about young children who call parents by their first names, citing this as a symptom of national decline.

But Mr Kasich's pragmatism outweighs his flaws. He tries to do what works, not what will win him a standing ovation from conservative purists. Unlike many Republicans, he sought a positive mandate from voters this week—and he won it triumphantly in Ohio, the ultimate bellwether state. The crowded Republican field for the White House in 2016 surely has room for him.

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