

Gov. Charlie Baker says Trump 'hurt the party's chances' in midterm elections

Colin A. Young, State House News Service

Stepping onto a stage that he usually shuns, outgoing Gov. Charlie Baker recently invited CNN to his State House office so he could share his thoughts on the midterm elections and the direction of his Republican Party.

In the interview that aired Monday on the national network, the two-term governor said his party needs to realize that "voters want collaborative elected officials."

"I think the biggest issue that played out in the midterms is something that I've talked about a lot over the course of the past eight years, which is voters, generally speaking, especially in battleground states aren't interested in extremism. They just aren't," Baker said in the interview with Jake Tapper. "They want people who they believe are going to be reasonable, who are going to be collaborative and who represent sort of the fundamental tenet of democracy that it's supposed to be a distributed decision-making model and you're supposed to be OK with that."

Though they may still end up with control of the U.S. House, Republicans took a drubbing in last week's midterms. What was forecast to be a "red wave" ended up being the best midterms for a sitting president's party in decades as Democrats retained control of the U.S. Senate for the rest of President Joe Biden's term. Baker, a Republican who has at times been the "most popular" governor in America, will be replaced in the corner office by Democrat Maura Healey, and Baker did not campaign for her defeated GOP rival, Geoff Diehl.

As he introduced the pre-taped interview with the outgoing governor, Tapper said that “Baker rarely does national TV interviews but he invited me to his office in the State House for an exclusive one-on-one because he was seemingly so distressed about where the Republican Party is headed.”

Baker said the Republican Party feels “significant influence from the former president,” referring to Donald Trump, and said Trump’s influence “probably hurt the party and hurt the party’s chances on Election Day, not just here in Massachusetts, in Maryland, but in many of those other battleground states.”

“The big message coming out of Tuesday, and I would argue the big message voters are going to send going forward, is you need to demonstrate in word and deed that you believe this is always going to be about more than just your party and you’re partisans,” Baker, who only endorsed one Republican candidate running statewide here this year, said.

The governor, who often deflected questions about politics before last week’s elections, opted against seeking a third term and furthering his own politics of bipartisanship. His like-minded lieutenant governor, Karyn Polito, also chose not to run for governor, leaving the Trump-backed Diehl to try to hold the office for the GOP.

The governor then touched upon some of what he talked about when he gave a lecture at Harvard’s Institute of Politics earlier this month. Millions of people every year give up on political parties and become independent or unenrolled voters, Baker said.

“That’s a big statement that people are making about what they think about the narrowness of the vision and the attitude of the parties,” he said.

In that speech at Harvard, and again on CNN, Baker recounted how David Bowie in 1999 was already talking about how

dramatically – for good and ill – the internet would change society. Baker said the iconic artist was right in many ways.

“There will be certain things the internet will do that will be wonderful and amazing, and that’s absolutely the case. But he also said it would create tremendous disruption and this capacity for a very dark side to find itself and to leverage it and to make it something where truth would be defined by the users and the producers,” Baker said. “And I think in some ways he was right. And he was the only one who was talking about this back then, I give him huge credit.”

Asked why he hasn’t more outspoken against President Trump, despite being billed as an anti-Trump Republican, Baker retorted that he has not “been shy about my point of view on this stuff, I’ve just chosen to make the way I govern and the way we get things done a statement about how I think this should work.” Baker also mentioned that he did not vote for Trump either time the former president ran for office.

Tapper asked the governor why Republicans weren’t “running to you” for a White House run, given Baker’s “most popular governor” status.

“Well first of all, I’m a northeast Republican, which looks and acts a little different than many of the Republicans around the country,” Baker responded. “It’s a 50-state country and that’s part of what makes it beautiful and gorgeous and also what creates a lot of the noise that goes on at the national level.”

He added that Republicans need to broaden their horizons beyond the party’s core to reach out to independent voters if they want success on the national scale.

Earlier this year, when Baker was participating in a CNN-hosted conference in California, Harvard professor David Liu tweeted that Baker told attendees he would be ‘in the picture’ in the 2024 election.

"I am not, nor will I ever be – OK? My wife is standing right back there and she will be the first to vouch – a candidate for national office," Baker said in July 2015.

Baker is spending the early part of this week in Florida for meetings of the Republican Governors Association, a group dedicated to electing and reelecting GOP governors.