

In state legislatures, Democrats build on majority

By ROBERT TANNER – Nov 5, 2008

The wave of enthusiasm for Barack Obama and Democrats reshaped control of state legislatures, leaving Democrats in control across nearly the entire Northeast and deepening the partisan divide across the country.

Democrats expanded their one-party control from 23 states to 27 states, while Republicans held steady at 14 states, according to preliminary results.

It was the third election cycle in a row that showed benefits for Democrats. But even with the shift of control, the National Conference of State Legislatures estimated Democrats would not pick up many legislative seats overall.

"We're as polarized as we've been in 25 years at the legislative level. After really an era of parity, now we're seeing more polarization," said Tim Storey, elections expert at the NCSL. "There will be some Obama coattails, but they will not be substantial in terms of seats."

Republicans gained in states where Obama fared poorly. In Oklahoma and Tennessee, the GOP won historic control in both legislatures. In Montana, where results were not final, Republicans appeared to take control of one chamber and hoped for at least a tie in the other.

The number of split states fell to 7. Nebraska is unicameral.

The outcome of elections in 44 states for legislatures — some are still unknown, with final tallies or recounts still pending — will help craft the domestic policy closest to voters and set the stage for the redrawing of congressional districts.

Democrats took the New York Senate, giving them control of the Legislature and the governor's office for the first time since 1935. They also now dominate in Delaware, and appear to have held off GOP efforts in Maine and Pennsylvania, though some races remain close. The latest Associated Press count put the Democratic edge in the Pennsylvania House at 101-99, with three races still undecided.

If the lead holds, that would give Democrats the entire East Coast north of Virginia, with the lone GOP holdout the Pennsylvania Senate.

Democrats also took chambers in two large states that will figure prominently in redistricting after 2010 — the Ohio House, where control is now split, and the Wisconsin Assembly, where Democrats now control the entire legislature and the governor's office.

In Alaska, Democrats picked up one seat and tied Republicans in the state Senate, a political jab for Sarah Palin, the Alaska governor and McCain's vice-presidential pick. Democrats picked up seats in the Texas House and held out hope they could tie, though absentee and military ballots were still being counted.

"Last night really showed the strength of America's Democratic leaders all the way up and down the tickets," said Matt Compton with the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee. The deep support for Obama "definitely helped in terms of Democratic enthusiasm."

Republicans fended off a Democratic effort to take at least one chamber of the solidly GOP Arizona Legislature, home of John McCain. They also held majorities in South Dakota, where some Democrats had predicted gains.

"McCain was helpful in this state — he won every county," said Oklahoma state Sen. Glenn Coffee, who shared the Senate presidency under the previously tied chamber. "But every district was a little bit different. Certainly the economy was part of it."

While Democrats improved their standing in legislatures, the slightness of the growth is what's notable given the national scope of Democrats' success, said Alan Rosenthal of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

"Competition goes on, statehouses are up for grabs, but you can't completely wipe out the minority party," Rosenthal said. "The Republicans are in trouble, but they're not as wiped out as they would be if all elections are at-large statewide."