

Poor sales pitch on health care reform blamed for Democrats' loss of House

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Democrats lost control of the House because health care reform was badly sold and the party has a "chronic serious problem" of talking over the heads of the American people, Rutgers University political scientist Ross Baker said this morning.

"It was a calamity for the Democrats, but perhaps it wasn't an apocalypse," because the party held onto control of the Senate, Baker said at a post-election analysis session at Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Unofficial results showed Republicans would hold at least 239 seats in the House next year. Democrats currently hold 255 seats. In the Senate, the Democrats' 59-seat majority was trimmed to at least 51, with elections for the Republican-held seat in Alaska and seats held by Democrats held seats in Washington

and Colorado still undecided.

The most significant losses for Democrats came in the Rust Belt, with Republicans picking up congressional seats and governor's offices in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, said Peter McDonough, who was communications chief for former Gov. Christie Whitman.

He said the attention paid to the Tea Party movement was somewhat overblown, because "the nut jobs of the Tea Party lost" and most pivotal elections turned on Republicans winning votes from independents who had overwhelmingly supported President Obama two years ago.

In New Jersey, only incumbent Rep. John Adler, D-Cherry Hill, lost his bid to re-election. McDonough said the victory by former NFL player Jon Runyan was partly due to the district's Republican leanings, which Adler was able to offset two years ago by drawing a large number of votes from Willingboro, a town with a significant African American population.

One Tea Party favorite, Highlands Mayor Anna Little, lost by 12 percent to veteran Rep. Frank Pallone, D-Long Branch. Tea Party backed Senate candidates in Nevada and Delaware also lost.

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"I've often said there's usually only one question in an election: Change or more of the same. And for the third time in three election cycles, change won," McDonough said. "The message coming from voters to incumbents was: 'You're going to keep getting thrown out until you get it right.'"

Nevertheless, Tea Party activists are taking credit for the surge of support for Republicans, and the GOP's leadership will have to deal with that energized wing going forward, said Seton Hall law professor Mark Alexander, an adviser to President Obama's 2008 campaign.

"Both Democrats and Republicans have a lot to be concerned about," Alexander said.

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