

Dems Win Big

November 8, 2006

by Andrew Davis and Amy Wooten

Democrats won control of the U.S. House and have appeared to also grab the majority in the Senate, while Illinois Democrats came out mostly on top.

After a heated and undecided battle that continued throughout election night, Todd Stroger declared victory in the race for Cook County Board President Wednesday afternoon. Stroger and Republican Tony Peraica competed in one of the hardest-fought and unusual contests in recent memory.

Incumbent Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich held onto his post by defeating Judy Baar Topinka, the state's Treasurer, and Green Party candidate Rich Whitney.

And on the state anti-gay marriage referendums, the only bright spot appears to have come from Arizona.

The National Front

The eyes of the nation were focused on several U.S. Congressional races—including three House races in Illinois—because Democrats were hopeful that they would at least regain control of the House, if not the Senate. In fact, the contests in the 6th, 8th and 10th Congressional district were deemed so important that everyone from Bill Clinton and Barack Obama to George W. and Laura Bush came to stump for their party's respective candidates.

Democrats needed a net gain of 15 seats to take control of the House—and more than succeeded, gaining an estimated 27 slots. In doing so, Nancy Pelosi is expected to become the first-ever female Speaker of the House. Republican control of Congress was on the line at a time when many voters were affected by the Iraq War and the behavior in the nation's capital (including the fallout regarding the Rep. Mark Foley scandal).

Chicago political consultant Mike Bauer—who was in Washington, D.C., on election night—said that the mood in the city was “phenomenal and ecstatic. Voters absolutely made their statement.” When asked about Pelosi's top priorities, Bauer told Windy City Times that they would involve “raising the minimum wage and having affordable healthcare.”

In other big news, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced on Nov. 8 that he is stepping down from his post, in part due to heavy Republican losses.

The resignation of Rumsfeld, who has served as defense secretary for six years, occurred just a day after the balance of power in the U.S. House tipped towards the Democratic Party. It is also very possible that Democrats will take over the U.S. Senate.

The shift in power was a clear indication that voters across the nation are dissatisfied with progress in Iraq. Rumsfeld has also taken a lot of heat for his policies in Iraq.

President Bush indicated that former CIA director Robert Gates will replace Rumsfeld.

Democrats fared better nationally than they did locally. In the 6th Congressional District in Illinois, Democratic Iraq War veteran Tammy Duckworth came up short against Republican incumbent Peter Roskam for Rep. Henry Hyde's vacant seat. Also, in the 10th Congressional District, Republican Mark Kirk managed to turn back an unexpectedly strong multimillion-dollar challenge from Democrat Dan Seals. Polls released as recently as late October showed that the two were in a statistical dead heat.

However, in the 8th District, Democratic incumbent Melissa Bean was declared the winner, besting Republican challenger David McSweeney. Bean did well in the polls, but negative ads tightened the race.

For House Speaker Dennis Hastert, the night was certainly bittersweet. The Republican easily defeated Democratic challenger John Laesch for re-election, but he will lose his Speaker of the House position because the Democrats will be the majority there.

Other winners in Illinois included Bobby Rush (1st District), Jesse Jackson, Jr. (2nd), Luis Guterrez (3rd), Jan Schakowsky (9th) and Judy Biggert (13th).

On another front, Democrat Nick Lampson was projected to be the winner over Republican write-in candidate Shelley Sekula-Gibbs for the 22nd District seat in Texas—which was once held by Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Lampson's victory marked the first time a Democrat had represented that district in more than two decades. In addition, Democrat Tim Mahoney completed an improbable run for the U.S. House by narrowly defeating Republican Joe Negron for Foley's seat in Florida.

The Log Cabin Republicans, not surprisingly, expressed disappointment with the Democratic takeover of the House and blamed the loss on divisiveness. "Republicans lost this election because independent voters abandoned the GOP," asserted organization Executive Vice President Patrick Sammon. "Social conservatives drove the GOP's agenda the last several years. Their divisive agenda alienated the mainstream Republicans and independents who determined this election's outcome. Social conservatives should take responsibility for this loss."

Regarding the U.S. Senate, the Democratic opponents finally prevailed in Virginia and Montana, giving the party 49 seats—the same number the Republicans have. However, since the two independent Senators have indicated that they will caucus with the Democrats, they have at least an implicit majority.

Connecticut made news because Joe Lieberman, one of the aforementioned independents, defeated Democrat Ned Lamont and Republican Alan Schlesinger. Lieberman, the Democrats' 2000 vice-presidential nominee and a three-term Connecticut senator, lost in the primary election to the anti-war Democrat because of his staunch support for President Bush concerning Iraq. Although Lieberman has said that he will caucus with Democrats after the election, Republicans still hope to persuade him to defect to their side. (The other independent is Bernie Sanders of Vermont.)

The Democratic steamroller also made Rick Santorum one of its victims. Santorum, a strong voice for conservatives who rose to be the number three Senate Republican, was crushed by Bob Casey, an anti-abortion, anti-gun control son of a popular Pennsylvania governor. Several pro-GLBT groups expressed their satisfaction with this result. **In fact, Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, released a statement saying, "We are thrilled, ecstatic and overjoyed that Rick Santorum has been thrashed at the polls. His extreme and gratuitous homophobia will no longer pollute the Senate. Good riddance."**

In another race of interest, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida routed Republican challenger Katherine Harris, the congresswoman famous for her role in overseeing the Florida recount that gave George W. Bush the presidency in 2000. With 93 percent of the expected vote counted, Nelson led Harris 61 percent to 38 percent.

Tennessee saw Republican Bob Corker defeat Democrat Harold Ford, Jr., in a fierce contest for a U.S. Senate seat. Ford was attempting to become the first Black senator to come from the state. On the other end of the political spectrum, popular Democratic incumbent Dianne Feinstein easily beat Republican Dick Mountjoy as she ran for a third full term. Also, in Washington State, Democratic incumbent Maria Cantwell bested Republican Mike McGavick.

In a big victory for Democrats, candidate Claire McCaskill defeated Republican U.S. Sen. Jim Talent. The win gave the Democrats a net gain of four seats in the U.S. Senate; at the time (during the early morning hours on Wednesday) they needed to capture two more for a Senate majority.

As of Wednesday afternoon, a Democratic majority in the Senate hangs on the line. Democrats won the race in Montana when Jon Tester, an organic farmer, apparently defeated incumbent Sen. Conrad Burns, who has ties to lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Now, it all comes down to the race in Virginia, where Democrat Jim Webb holds a slight lead against his Republican opponent.

Democrats also made pertinent gains in the governors' races. Deval Patrick, a former Coca-Cola executive, became the first Black governor of Massachusetts and is the first Democrat to take the office in 16 years. The pro-gay organization MassEquality issued a statement lauding Patrick's win, saying that " [w] ith Deval Patrick's victory in the gubernatorial election, Massachusetts voters are sending to the corner office for the first time a governor who fully supports marriage equality for same-sex couples."

In a key governor's race in Ohio, J. Kenneth Blackwell, the Republican candidate for governor, lost by a substantial margin to Democrat Ted Strickland. During a debate, Blackwell said that Strickland did not vote for a resolution condemning sex between adults and children as a U.S. congressman, leading the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) to laud Strickland, The Beacon Journal reported.

Also, Republican California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was re-elected by a wide margin. He defeated Democratic challenger Philip Angelides 60 percent to 35 percent. In Florida, Republican Charlie Crist—who was the subject of persistent gay rumors that he denied—won his first term as governor by defeating Democratic opponent Jim Davis 52 percent to 45 percent. Jennifer Granholm easily kept her seat as Democratic governor of Michigan. Democrat Eliot Spitzer won easily as the pick for New York governor.

Issues

In a staunch victory for the GLBT community, Arizona became the first state in the nation to defeat a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage on Tuesday night.

Yet again, voters had to decide on the divisive issue of gay marriage this election. Although the victory in Arizona is cause for celebration, seven states—Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin—have passed anti-gay marriage amendments.

The victory of right-wing conservatives in these states this election will bring the total number of states where voters passed similar amendments to 28 since 1998.

GLBT organizations across the nation had a hopeful eye on Wisconsin, the state that many felt would most likely be the first state in the nation to defeat such a ban.

“Obviously, this is pretty disappointing and hurtful to a lot of families in this state,” Joshua Freker of Fair Wisconsin said. “I think today marks the end of the beginning of using gays as political scapegoats,” he said, adding that across the state, right-wing politicians were getting a run for their money, and Gov. Jim Doyle was rewarded for his strong stand for GLBT rights by being re-elected.

Despite the disappointing defeat for Illinois’ neighbor to the north, Freker said that he was pleased Fair Wisconsin was able to get an unprecedented broad coalition of support against the ban.

In Colorado, voters also decided on a measure to grant same-sex couples domestic-partnership rights, called Proposition 1, which failed.

In Missouri, the vote to allow stem-cell research was 51 percent in favor with 94 percent of precincts reporting. To its supporters, Amendment 2 would assure residents that they’ll have access to the cures that embryonic stem cell research might bring, while foes say the measure would actually create a right to clone.

Pro-choice advocates had a reason to cheer, as a ballot measure that would ban nearly all abortions in South Dakota was rejected. With 98 percent of the precincts reporting, opponents of the ban had 56 percent to the supporters’ 44 percent.

And an affirmative-action ban passed in Michigan.

Statewide Offices

After months of addressing various groups, criss-crossing the state and airing (mostly negative) advertisements, the political contest between Democratic Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich and Republican challenger Judy Baar Topinka finally ended, with the incumbent emerging as the victor, winning handily. Rich Whitney, the Green Party candidate, came in a distant third.

After 67 percent of the precincts reported, Blagojevich captured 49 percent of the vote, with Topinka garnering 40 percent. (Whitney had almost 11 percent, a better-than-expected showing.) As expected, the victor took Chicago, a Democratic stronghold. (Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn, as part of the Blagojevich ticket, was also re-elected.)

The race was unusual in that Blagojevich and Topinka (as well as Whitney) appealed to segments of the GLBT community. During his term, Blagojevich signed the gay-rights bill, extended domestic-partnership benefits and supported ADAP (the AIDS Drug Assistance Program) , among other things. Topinka appointed members of the gay community to posts in her office (as did Blagojevich) and, in 2002, announced her support for the Center on Halsted by awarding a \$10 million link deposit to assist the organization with its funding efforts. However, neither candidate supported same-sex marriage, although both advocated civil unions; Whitney, on the other hand, was in favor of full marriage rights. In addition, Topinka was criticized for heading the only state office that does not offer its employees domestic-partnership benefits—although she recently told Windy City Times that she would once there was a feasible source from which to draw said benefits. Also, there were also reservations about Topinka runningmate Joe Birkett, who is viewed as ultra-conservative.

However, in the minds of many, Blagojevich and Topinka will be remembered for engaging in one of the most contentious gubernatorial races in recent memory. Blagojevich unloaded with his opponent-bashing “What’s she thinking?” ads, while Topinka derided the governor as scandal-ridden and even said recently that he should manage the Chicago Cubs because “they’re a bunch of losers, too.”

Mike McRaith, the openly gay director of the Illinois Department of Insurance (who was appointed by Blagojevich) , told Windy City Times on Tuesday night that he thinks the governor was re-elected because he “made people his priority regarding such [issues] as healthcare, the environment and education. All of these things indicate a proactive approach to leading people. Plus, what he’s done for the GLBT community is unprecedented.”

In the race for attorney general, Lisa Madigan had little trouble getting re-elected, dispatching Republican Stewart Umholtz and Green Party candidate David Black with 71 percent of the vote (with 67 percent of precincts reporting) .

Jesse White once again captured the contest for secretary of state, securing 62 percent of the vote (again, with two-thirds of precincts reporting). His Republican challenger, Dan Rutherford, had accused White of nepotism but the incumbent responded that almost all of his relatives were hired without his knowledge and that Rutherford was avoiding the real issues. Rutherford garnered 33 percent of the vote.

In the state treasurer race, Democrat Alexi Giannoulias overcame Republican foe Christine Radogno and openly gay Green Party candidate Dan Rodriguez-Schlorff. (Giannoulias had garnered 53 percent to Radogno’s 43 percent with 80 percent of the precincts reports.) Radogno has said that she questioned Giannoulias’ credibility since House Speaker Rep. Michael Madigan— chair of the state’s Democratic Party—did not endorse him due to questions about alleged mob ties to Giannoulias’ family’s bank. Giannoulias told Windy City Times that such charges were “absurd and offensive.”

Lastly, in a race that was under the radar, to say the least, Democratic Dan Hynes retained his seat as comptroller, handily defeating Republican Carole Pankau 63 percent to 32 percent.

Concerning the General Assembly, there were only a few hotly contested races.

In the State Senate, GLBT ally Sen. Carol Ronen has been re-elected. However, there were a small number of close races throughout the state where Democrats prevailed.

Democrat Michael Noland defeated Republican Billie Diane Roth 22nd). Pro-choice supporter Democrat Dan Kotowski cam out on top in the 33rd district. In the 39th District, Democrat Don Harmon won.

In the General Assembly, openly gay Greg Harris will replace retiring Rep. Larry McKeon. Harris ran unopposed. Reps. John Fritchey, Sara Feigenholtz and Harry Osterman were safe in their seats.

In the 8th District, early results indicate Democrat La Shawn K. Ford has won. Democrat David Miller was also leading against Republican Raymond Tibbs (29th) . Early results also show Democrat Barbara Flynn Currie (25th) defeated Republican James Sanders.

Cook County

The political scuffle for the Cook County Board President seat between Democratic Ald. Todd Stroger and Republican Commissioner Tony Peraica was not resolved as easily as some of the other races around the state.

After yet another late-night election horror story, Democratic candidate Todd Stroger announced his victory late Wednesday afternoon. Peraica, who has vowed to watch Stroger closely, conceded defeat but appeared to be hanging on to his County Board commissioner's seat.

Major delays postponed the news because of several transmission problems with the new voting system. Judges in suburban Cook County reported problems transmitting results downtown. Results were coming in much slower than expected because individuals had to physically bring memory patches and cartridges that contained results downtown to be entered into the system.

After midnight, Peraica's camp marched down to the Cook County Clerk's office to protest and demand answers. Stroger supporters later joined. In the early hours of the morning, County Clerk David Orr told the press that "hooligans" and "drunks" fought with individuals and deputies trying to access the freight elevator to deliver boxes containing results, and the elevator was broken. It was unknown whether or not any of those individuals were affiliated with one of the candidates.

The highly anticipated race was watched closely by GLBT leaders, who feared that Stroger's right-wing opponent would win due to voter's concerns over corruption in county government and distaste for how Stroger—son of longtime board president John Stroger—was nominated.

Countywide, Democrats fared well, including the re-election of County Clerk David Orr. Democrat Tom Dart defeated Republican candidate Peter Garza in the bid for Sheriff, while incumbent Maria Pappas won re-election as Treasurer by a landslide.

Reformer and GLBT community darling Forrest Claypool, who lost to John Stroger in the race for board president in the primaries, will rejoin the Cook County Board. He, like many other commissioners such as Mike Quigley, ran unopposed.

Debra Shore made history by becoming the first open lesbian elected to a non-judicial office in Cook County when she won a seat as Commissioner of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD). "I'm excited and humbled to be a part of this board," Shore told Windy City Times. "I'm so proud and pleased to have a little bit of history made," she added.

Shore was a shoo-in for the position—she was one of three Democrats vying for three open seats on the board, and there were no Republican challengers. The conservationist had captured the top spot in the primaries, coming out as the favorite among voters.

Shore told Windy City Times that she was also grateful of the response from the GLBT community, and all the attention the agency received this election cycle.

"I feel like we got such a response from people about ideas, the importance of the agency and the issues of importance to people, like preserving our water," Shore said.

The MWRD is charged with preserving and enhancing the area's water systems.

Judges

Gay visibility within Cook County's judicial system has increased to an all-time high.

"I think we've come a long way," said Cook County Circuit Court Judge Tom Chiola, who was the first openly gay candidate elected to any state, county or municipal office in Illinois when he was elected to the bench in 1994. "We have a lot of people now who can be role models for people to look up to, and who can break stereotypes."

With the election of newcomers Mike McHale and Mary Colleen Roberts to the bench, and the retention of Circuit Court judges Chiola and Colleen Sheehan, there are now 12 openly gay and lesbian judges serving within Cook County's court system.

McHale will become a Circuit Court judge, filling the Morrissey vacancy. Roberts won the 11th Judicial Subcircuit of Cook County judgeship. Before the election, there were 10 individuals from the GLBT community serving on the bench.

"To think that 12 years ago we have none," Chiola added. "I think it's a wonderful commentary on the growth of the political acumen of the Democratic Party. There's a lot to be said of the Democratic Party to notice the importance of the community."