

# Red Tide

A GOP wave washed over state legislatures on Election Day.



BY KAREN HANSEN

The winds of change blew with hurricane force through America's state legislatures Election Day, changing the political landscape from blue to red in historic terms.

Just two years ago the barometric pressure reading couldn't have been more different. Democrats netted more than 100 state legislative seats across the nation, wresting control of 60 of the 99 chambers—the highest number in 15 years—in the Democratic sweep that won them the White House and solidified their control in Congress. But this Nov. 2—true to the predictions of prognosticators and pollsters—was demolition day for Democrats. Voters took their anger and disillusionment with the economy into the voting booth and shook up the political order from top to bottom.

Voters who decided to clean house in Congress handed Republicans a victory in the states, too. Midterm elections predictably swing against the party of the president, but the public's stunning repudiation of Democrats in 2010 put the GOP in control of the most state legislative seats since 1928. At the start of Election Day, Democrats controlled both chambers in 27 states, to the GOP's 14; eight were divided and Nebraska is nonpartisan. By the next morning, Republicans had taken control of at least 19 chambers, giving them the majority in 25 state legislatures. Three chambers—the Oregon, New York and Washington Senates remain—undecided at press time.

Karen Hansen is the editor of *State Legislatures*.

*"The economy was 75 percent of the explanation for everything that happened on Election Day."*

—LARRY SABATO, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR POLITICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Election Night belonged to the GOP. Democrats did not win a single additional chamber, and saw their control slip to 16 legislatures. And the number of new seats for Republicans—some 675—was truly historic. It is the largest Republican win since 1966, even bigger than the post-Watergate surge by Democrats in 1974. There are now more Republican state legislators than any time since the Great Depression.

The widely reported enthusiasm gap among Democrats was reflected in the number of candidates each party fielded. In the states, 6,115 legislative seats were up this year. (Four states—Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia—and three Senates—Kansas, New Mexico and South Carolina—did not have legislative elections.) Some 11,000 candidates ran for legislatures. This year Republicans put up 822 more than they did in 2008, while Democrats had 50 fewer candidates than two years ago.

Republicans successfully nationalized the election, expanding their congressional victories to the states. Polls before the election indicated that 75 percent of Americans believe things are going badly in the country. The old adage, "it's the economy, stupid," proved especially true Nov. 2. Voters by a 62

percent margin cited the economy as the most important issue, far overshadowing health care reform (19 percent) and immigration (8 percent). With one in nearly 10 Americans out of work and a drum beat against a growing federal deficit and expanded government, those lawmakers closest to the people were caught in the maelstrom of anxiety and demand for change that spelled doomsday for Democrats.

"The economy was 75 percent of the explanation for everything that happened on Election Day," says Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. "The new GOP state legislators appear to have the same priorities as their federal counterparts—less spending, lower taxes and a strong opposition to debt. This is a group of fiscal conservatives who favor smaller government. This is the common ground between the longtime Republican party base and the Tea Party activists."

## WASHINGTON AND THE STATES

The new congressional alignment will have significant impact on the relationship of the states and the federal government.

Norman Ornstein, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and longtime observer of Congress and elections, believes the economy and "the brutal facts of life in the political world" promise "it's not going to be a pretty picture for states."

"All the pressure in Washington is going to be on decreasing discretionary domestic spending," he says. "That means any state expecting help on Medicaid can forget about it. And the ability of Obama and the Democrats to keep extending unemployment ben-

**ELECTION 2010:  
STATE LEGISLATURES BY THE  
NUMBERS**

**675**

Seats Republicans added

**1928**

The last year GOP held this many seats

**55**

Chambers controlled by Republicans

**120**

Seats gained by Republicans in the 400-seat New Hampshire House

**11**

Democratic leaders who lost their re-election bids

**32**

Republican-controlled houses, compared with 17 before the election

**15**

Democratic-controlled houses, compared with 32 before the election

**30\***

GOP-controlled senates, compared with 24 before the election

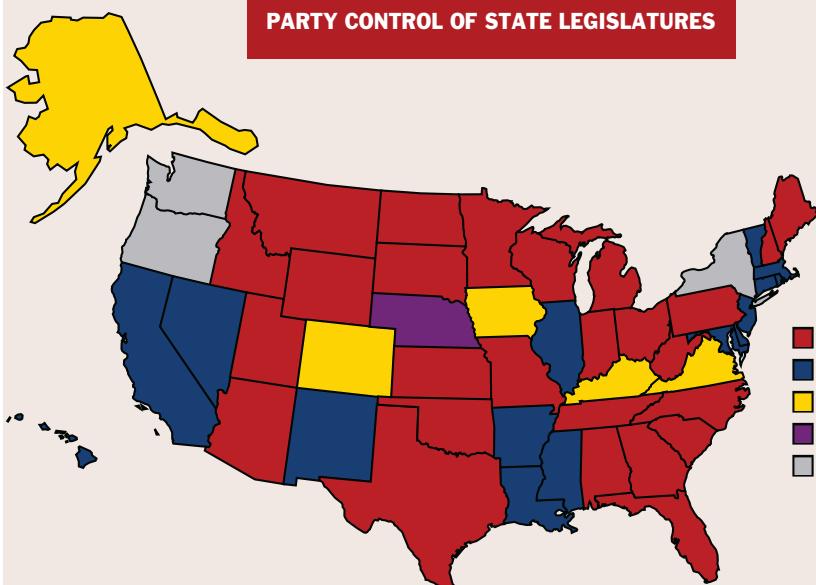
**19**

Democratic-controlled senates, compared with 26 before the election

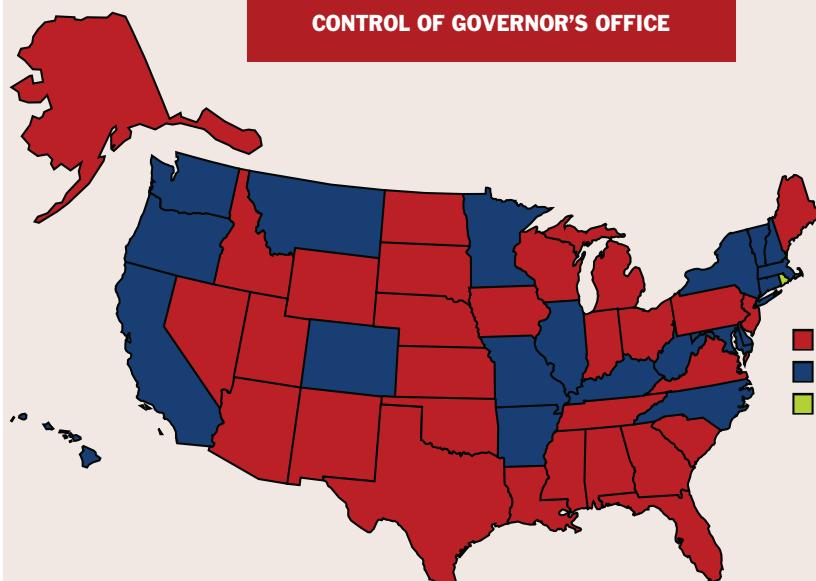
Source: NCSL, 2010

\*The New York Senate remained undecided at press time.

**PARTY CONTROL OF STATE LEGISLATURES**



**CONTROL OF GOVERNOR'S OFFICE**



efits will be much more limited.”

Even though the economy and the jobs picture are improving incrementally, unemployment remains stubbornly high. “If people don’t have jobs and don’t have unemployment insurance,” Ornstein says, “much of the burden is going to fall on the states and cities. If you have no more Medicaid money when people are unemployed and going on Medicaid, and face other fiscal burdens, it’s going to be tough to balance budgets.”

**RED IN THE MIDDLE**

Republicans changed the political order in

what was the largest midterm election turnout ever, with some 90 million people casting ballots, but still far less than the general election vote in 2008. And although people may have voted for divided government at the federal level, in the Midwest and the South they clearly wanted the GOP in charge. Republicans also made substantial gains in the East, where they won 233 new seats and the West, where they added 108 seats. Not since the Eisenhower era in 1952 have the Republicans controlled so many legislative chambers.

The electoral battleground in the Midwest, once the industrial bastion of Democrats, is

now a swath of red.

In Michigan, Republicans have controlled the Senate since 1983, but the House has swung back and forth between the two parties. On election eve, Democrats held the majority in the 110-member House 64-42 with four vacancies. The next day, the GOP was in control 63-47. Term limits, retirements and defeats have changed the landscape of one the nation’s largest full-time legislatures. In the 38-member Senate, 29 lawmakers will be new, although many have come from the House. But the House is a completely different story. Of the 110 members, 95 have two

## CAPITOL TO CAPITOL

There are 43 former state lawmakers who were elected to Congress on Nov. 2. Additionally, former Kansas legislator Jerry Moran is moving from the U.S. House of Representatives to the U.S. Senate.

### U. S. SENATE

#### Connecticut

Richard Blumenthal

#### Florida

Marco Rubio

#### Kansas

Jerry Moran \*

#### West Virginia

Joe Manchin

\*Moved from the House to the Senate

### Louisiana

Cedric Richmond

### Maryland

Andy Harris

### Massachusetts

Bill Keating

### Michigan

Justin Amash

Hansen Clarke

Bill Huizenga

Tim Walberg

### Mississippi

Alan Nunnelee

### Missouri

Vicky Hartzler

### Nevada

Joe Heck

### New Mexico

Steve Pearce

### North Dakota

Rick Berg

### Ohio

Bob Gibbs

Steve Stivers

### South Carolina

Jeff Duncan

Mick Mulvaney

Tim Scott

### South Dakota

Kristi Noem

### Tennessee

Diane Black

### Virginia

H. Morgan Griffith

Robert Hurt

### Washington

Jamie Herrera

### West Virginia

David McKinley

Source: NCSL

*Voters are “looking for something that works and when it doesn’t work quickly, it’s throw the ‘ins’ out and bring the ‘outs’ in.”*

—NORMAN ORNSTEIN, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Michigan GOP controls everything—the Legislature, the governorship and even the state Supreme Court.

Wisconsin became the only state where Democrats lost the governor’s mansion, a U.S. Senate seat and the entire Legislature. “It’s just like ’08 and ’06 in reverse,” says Reince Priebus, state GOP chair. Republicans’ statewide sweep was the sweetest for the GOP there in 72 years.

The Minnesota Legislature fell to the Republicans for the first time in nearly 40 years. “This is an important, critical time in our state’s landscape,” House Republican Leader Kurt Zellers says. “We’re going to get to work. This is about getting the state’s economy back on track, people back to work and Minnesota back to being pro-business again.”

Republicans also won the Indiana House, a chamber where control has switched 20 times over the past 110 years. They notched wins in the Ohio House and the Pennsylvania House, giving them control of both legislatures, and captured both governorships as well. Election night allows the GOP to shape the political terrain in the Midwest for the next 10 years when they begin drawing congressional and legislative maps next year.

### GOP GAINS IN THE SOUTH

In the South, Republicans continued their march to majority. In 1990 Republicans did not control a single chamber in a Southern legislature. Now the geography is decidedly red. Republicans made history in Alabama and North Carolina, winning control of both states for the first time since Reconstruction.

In Alabama, Democrats had been in control for well over a century. They won the House in 1870 and the Senate in 1872 and never let go. Until election night when the GOP wrested both chambers.

“It’s a big deal,” said Auburn University at Montgomery political scientist Brad Moody. “The Alabama Legislature has been one of the last to switch from being Democratic controlled to Republican controlled.”

North Carolina Republicans last held a majority in the Senate in 1870. “In serving the people, you understand a day like this may come,” said Marc Basnight, the Democratic Senate president for 18 years. “You are hopeful that the change is beneficial, new ideas, different thoughts. This

or fewer years of experience. They will have to gain it quickly. First on the agenda is closing a \$1.5 billion budget gap.

“We’re ready to get to work,” says Republican Representative Jase Bolger, who is poised to take the speaker’s podium for the GOP. “I think the voters are very clear they want to see spending control, they want to see jobs. It’s a huge task in front of us. But big challenges bring big opportunities.”

For the first time since 1998, when John Engler was governor, the



REPRESENTATIVE  
**JAMES “JASE” BOLGER**  
MICHIGAN



HOUSE REPUBLICAN  
LEADER  
**KURT ZELLERS**  
MINNESOTA



**SENATOR**

**MARC BASNIGHT**

**NORTH CAROLINA**



**SPEAKER**

**JOE HACKNEY**

**NORTH CAROLINA**

is only what the people want, so that means it's good."

The GOP also won the House. "It was just a wave," said Democratic Speaker Joe Hackney. "I was here for the national Republican wave in 1994, and this is like that." The new North Carolina Legislature will face a \$3.5 billion budget gap.

Oklahoma Republicans maintain control of the Legislature, and their victory in the governor's race puts the GOP in control of state government for the first time. A Republican also won the governorship in Tennessee, a state already under GOP legislative control, giving the party total control there for the first time since Reconstruction.

#### **MIXING COLORS**

In New Hampshire, Republicans won a stunning net gain of more than 125 seats, giving them control of the House and Senate. The GOP also won the Maine Senate. In New York, Democrats achieved a slim 32-30 Senate majority just two years ago after some 50 years of Republican power. The final count was still in play at press time, with Republicans claiming 32 or 33 seats and the possibility of a tie looming.

In the West, the Republican rout was somewhat stymied. Colorado voters gave control of the House to the GOP, but not the Senate, and they put another Democrat into the governor's mansion. The GOP won the Montana House, which had been tied, and it already controlled the Senate. In Oregon, the only state to conduct all elections by mail, the House is split 30-30, and Democrats appear to have held on to a narrow majority in the

Senate. Voters returned former Democratic Governor John Kitzhaber to his old office for an unprecedented third term. He was governor from 1995-2003 with a GOP majority in the legislature.

Democrats retained control of the Washington House, but the Senate was still undecided at press time. Nothing changed in Alaska or Hawaii. The Alaska Senate remained tied and Republicans kept the House. Hawaii continues to be one of the most Democratic states in the country.

#### **POISED TO REDRAW**

Sabato says when voters went to the polls to hand Republicans historic wins, most "clearly pulled the 'R' lever for state legislators, too," leading to one of the best Republican years at the state level on record. "And if you're going to have a great year at the state level, you want to pick the Census year in order to reap the redistricting bonanza," he says.

Republicans are in the redistricting cat bird's seat, and the prize is huge. The GOP will be in complete charge of remapping some 190 U.S. House districts when the Cen-

sus data are released in February, solidifying congressional gains and their legislative victories. The GOP finds itself in the best position for redistricting since the landmark "one-person, one-vote" *Baker v. Carr* decision in 1962. Republican legislative wins in 2010 give them the upper hand in redistricting, so their victory could echo across the political landscape for at least the next 10 years.

The 2010 election was one for the record books, a realized dream for Republicans and a nightmare for Democrats. The pendulum will undoubtedly swing back some day, but for now, Republicans can enjoy making history before the reality sets in that state budgets are still on shaky ground, the hard work is only beginning, and the clock to the next election is ticking.

"When you get three wave elections in a row," Ornstein says, "it suggests that voters are simply more impatient. What they're looking for is something that works and when it doesn't work quickly, it's throw the 'ins' out and bring the 'outs' in."

The fingerprints of history are on the GOP.