

# Voter turnout at record low in off-year US elections

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Record low numbers of American voters cast ballots for either of the two major parties November 2, as off-year elections were held in four of the fifty states and in many localities. Republican candidates lost the only two contests for statewide office, in Kentucky and Mississippi, but took control of the state legislature in Virginia for the first time, and retained control of the lower house in New Jersey. No seats in the US House of Representatives or Senate were at stake.

One state house changed hands, in Mississippi, the poorest of the 50 states and one of the most backward socially and politically. Both the Democratic and Republican parties in Mississippi, in the heart of the Deep South, have ties to white supremacist groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens. Both parties nominated conservative politicians in the race to succeed retiring incumbent Kirk Fordice, a right-wing Republican, but the Democrats also sought to mobilize black voters, particularly in the heavily black Delta region of west-central Mississippi.

Democrat Ronnie Musgrove, the lieutenant governor, edged former congressman Mike Parker—a Democrat while in Congress who changed parties to run for statewide office—by a few hundred votes. Both candidates failed to win the required 50 percent of the total, and therefore, under Mississippi's constitution, the outcome will be decided by the state House of Representatives, in which the Democrats retained their top-heavy majority. Democratic candidates won all the other statewide races by comfortable margins.

In Kentucky, a southern border state, incumbent Democratic Governor Paul Patton won an easy reelection over a token and poorly financed Republican opponent. He received 59 percent of the vote compared to 23 percent for the Republican, Peppy Martin, and a Reform Party candidate who collected 16 percent of the

vote.

Voter turnout was only 22 percent, a record low for the state and half the figure of 1995, when Patton, a millionaire former coal mine operator, won a narrow victory with heavy backing from the state AFL-CIO and United Mine Workers. During Patton's first term he pushed through a major restructuring of workmen's compensation, backed by business groups and the Republican Party. As a result, he had the effective support of the state's political establishment for reelection.

After Martin won a Republican primary in which only 3 percent of those eligible voted, the state Republican Party dropped her campaign. When Martin, during a campaign debate, made the statement that 80 percent of county sheriffs and 30 percent of state policemen were involved in drug trafficking, Republican leaders denounced her and said they were voting for Patton. Martin carried only three eastern Kentucky coal counties, including Harlan, where miners voted in protest against Patton's workers compensation cuts.

The only significant Republican gain was the pickup of three seats in the Virginia state house of delegates, giving the Republicans control of both houses of the state legislature and the Virginia governorship for the first time. The Democratic Party had controlled the state legislature in Virginia continuously since the Civil War, losing control of the state senate in the last election and now losing the lower house.

Democrats made a similar three-seat gain in the state legislative elections in New Jersey, but Republicans retained control of both houses there. The New Jersey campaign saw a record low turnout of only 35 percent of registered voters, combined with record spending by the two big business parties, nearly \$20 million

combined, an unprecedented amount for an election involving only the lower house of a state legislature.

Mayoral elections saw a Democratic sweep of the largest cities casting ballots, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Salt Lake City and Columbus, Ohio. Longtime city councilman John Street only narrowly won the Philadelphia contest against Democrat-turned-Republican businessman Sam Katz, who ran a well-financed campaign and took nearly 49 percent of the vote. Street is a longtime fixture in the entrenched and conservative Philadelphia Democratic Party machine, headed by outgoing mayor Edward Rendell, which has repeatedly clashed with municipal workers.

Democrats won in the Midwestern state capitals of Indianapolis and Columbus for the first time in three decades. The Indianapolis vote was something of an embarrassment for Republican presidential frontrunner George W. Bush, whose top domestic affairs adviser is Stephen Goldsmith, the outgoing Republican mayor of the city. The Columbus election placed in office the city's first black mayor, Michael Coleman.

In San Francisco incumbent Democrat Willie Brown, who has carried through unpopular budget cuts, was forced into a runoff with two Democratic rivals, the former police chief, Frank Jordan, who ran on a right-wing law-and-order platform, and Supervisor (councilman) Tom Ammiano, who waged a successful write-in campaign. The runoff will take place December 14.

In Nassau County, Long Island, a major suburb of New York City with a population of more than one million, the long-standing Republican Party machine was shaken as Democrats captured control of the county legislature, although the county executive, Republican Thomas Gulotta, was not up for reelection.

A wide range of referendum propositions were on the ballot in many states, most of them accepted or rejected by tiny fractions of the electorate. One of the few which aroused widespread interest was a proposal to slash the 2.2 percent tax on automobiles in the state of Washington, reducing it to a flat \$30 fee, which passed easily. The measure, backed by right-wing anti-tax groups, also requires any future increase in state taxes and fees to be submitted to a statewide referendum vote.

In perhaps the most striking pair of results, voters in

Maine rejected a ballot proposition that would have banned the late-term abortion procedure known as "intact dilation and extraction"—called "partial birth abortion" by Christian fundamentalist groups—and approved a referendum to permit the medical use of marijuana to alleviate pain and suffering. The anti-abortion measure was defeated 44 percent to 56 percent, while the marijuana measure passed 61 percent to 39 percent.

Some 413,000 people voted, a turnout of about 45 percent, up from the normal off-year turnout in Maine, which has averaged 33 percent in recent elections. On both issues the effect of the vote was to leave decisions in the hands of doctors and patients, rather than making the state the enforcer of official Christian morality.



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