

Democratic Party takes control of both houses of Congress

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11 November 2006

The Democratic Party secured control of the US Congress in the November 7 midterm elections, winning at least 230 out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives and holding a 51-49 margin in the Senate. The last two Senate seats fell into place Thursday, when Republicans George Allen of Virginia and Conrad Burns of Montana conceded.

A total of six Senate Republican incumbents were defeated. Besides Allen and Burns, these included Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, the third-ranking Republican leader, Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, Michael DeWine of Ohio and James Talent of Missouri.

In addition to defeating the six incumbents, the Democrats successfully defended four contested Democratic-held Senate seats—in New Jersey, Maryland, Michigan and Minnesota. The only Republican victory in a close race was for the Tennessee seat vacated by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, won by Republican Bob Corker.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats gained at least 28 seats, well over the 15 they needed to become the majority party, with at least eight seats either undecided, facing recounts or awaiting runoff votes. All eight of these seats were held by Republicans, so a Democratic victory in any of them would represent an addition to the 230 seats they already claim.

Some 21 Republican incumbent congressmen were defeated for reelection, nearly half of them in the northeast, including two in New Hampshire, one in Connecticut, three in New York and four in Pennsylvania. Three more Republican incumbents were defeated in Indiana, and one each in Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Florida, Arizona and California. The Democrats also captured seven seats left open by a Republican retirement or resignation.

The open-seat victories included the capture of the Texas seat once held by former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who resigned after being indicted for campaign money-laundering, and the Ohio seat of Robert Ney, chairman of the House Administration Committee, who resigned after pleading guilty to accepting bribes from Republican influence peddler Jack Abramoff. The Democrats also won the Florida seat of Mark Foley, who resigned after his sexually explicit emails to male congressional pages became public.

The two top Republicans on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, which handles all tax legislation, were defeated: Clay Shaw of Florida and Nancy Johnson of Connecticut. The chairman of the House Republican Conference, Deborah Pryce, had a narrow lead in her Ohio district but could lose when all the votes are counted.

The Republicans narrowly avoided an even more disastrous defeat. In addition to the eight Republican-held seats still in danger, another ten Republican candidates barely scraped by, with winning margins of

less than five percent. These include Thomas Reynolds of New York, the head of the House Republican Campaign Committee.

While many individual contests were extremely close, the across-the-board character of the Republican defeat is demonstrated by a stunning fact: not a single Democratic seat was captured by a Republican challenger, either in the House of Representatives or the Senate, or in the races for more than three dozen state governorships.

The rout went much deeper than the loss of narrow majorities in both the House and Senate. Democrats captured six Republican-held governorships, defeating Maryland Governor Robert Ehrlich for reelection and winning open governorships in Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Iowa and Colorado. The balance in the 50 states shifted from 28-22 Republican to 28-22 Democrat, although the Republicans retained control of the statehouse in three of the four largest states, California, Texas and Florida.

Democrats made significant gains at the state legislative level as well, increasing their representation in all regions of the country, even the South, their first gains in that region since 1982. The Democrats took control of nine legislative houses from the Republicans, including the Michigan House, the Indiana House, the Wisconsin Senate and the Iowa House and Senate.

In New Hampshire, a traditionally Republican state, Democratic governor John Lynch was reelected and the Democrats won control of both houses of the legislature, giving them complete control of the state government for the first time since 1874. The Democrats won similar control of Colorado for the first time since 1960, and of Iowa for the first time since 1964.

Both sitting Republican congressmen in New Hampshire were defeated by their Democratic challengers, a reflection of the antiwar and anti-Bush sentiment which is particularly powerful in New England. The Democrats now enjoy a 21-1 margin in the House delegation from that region.

In Vermont, longtime independent congressman Bernard Sanders won the Senate seat left by retiring Senator James Jeffords. Sanders, a social democrat, will join the Democratic Party caucus. He becomes the first candidate running as a self-described socialist to win a US Senate seat.

Exit polling on election day confirmed that the central issue in the minds of voters was the war in Iraq, which is opposed by sizeable majorities in every region of the country. Public opinion is far more hostile to the war than the tepid posture of the Democratic candidates, who overwhelmingly focused on criticizing the conduct of the war by the Bush administration and calling for a new strategy to defeat the Iraqi resistance, rather than denying the war's legitimacy.

The pro-war *Washington Post* admitted, in its analysis of the vote,

“The election to a large extent became a national referendum on Mr. Bush and the war in Iraq, according to exit polls. Sixty percent of voters leaving the polls on Tuesday said they opposed the war in Iraq, and 40 percent said their vote was a vote against Mr. Bush... Eight in 10 voters who said they approved of the war in Iraq voted Republican, and 8 in 10 voters who said they disapproved voted Democratic, the exit polls said.”

The exit polls showed some 40 percent “strongly disapproved” of the war in Iraq, while 56 percent of the voters support withdrawing some or all US troops. In state after state there was a close correlation between antiwar sentiment and the vote for Democratic candidates, despite the fact that few of the Democrats advocated withdrawal of American troops.

As the *New York Times* noted, describing the duplicity of the Democratic campaign with evident admiration, “In more liberal districts, Democrats called for the troops to come home. In more conservative districts, they called for a plan for victory. But in just about every district, they attacked the administration’s missteps in Iraq, and accused the GOP-controlled Congress of failing to provide meaningful oversight.”

In New Jersey, for instance, nearly half of the voters said the war was extremely important in their decision in the Senate race, and two-thirds of those voted for the Democrat, Robert Menendez, who voted against the October 2002 resolution authorizing the war.

In Ohio, 56 percent expressed disapproval of the war, and of these, 82 percent voted for Democratic Senate candidate Sherrod Brown, who also voted against the 2002 war resolution. While 34 percent of Ohio voters said they were voting to show opposition to Bush, only 19 percent said they were voting to show support for him.

Rhode Island voters expressed the strongest anti-Bush and antiwar sentiments, with 75 percent disapproving of Bush’s record, 56 percent strongly disapproving, and 73 percent saying they were against the war, including 52 percent who were strongly against. Of those opposed to the war, 65 percent voted for Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse, who won handily despite the fact that the incumbent, Lincoln Chafee, was the only Republican candidate to have opposed the war resolution.

The biggest electoral upset came in Virginia, where incumbent Senator George Allen, a vocal supporter of the war, was trounced in the populous Northern Virginia suburbs where the Pentagon and its subcontractors are the largest employers. Democrat James Webb, a former Republican and Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration, opposed the war as a “strategic blunder” which was diverting US military resources from such potential targets as Iran, Syria and North Korea.

The only exception to the Democratic sweep of contested Senate races was in Tennessee, one of a handful of states where opinion polls show residual support for the war, although by the narrowest of margins. Exit polls found that 49 percent of those voting supported the war in Iraq, with 48 percent against, almost exactly the margin of Republican Bob Corker’s victory over Democrat Harold Ford. Ford gained the bulk of the antiwar vote in Tennessee despite campaigning as a strong supporter of the war and boasting of his vote in the House of Representatives for the 2002 war resolution.

In one other state the more pro-war Senate candidate prevailed—Joseph Lieberman, the incumbent Democratic senator from Connecticut, who lost the Democratic primary to an opponent who appealed to antiwar sentiment, Ned Lamont. Lieberman ran as an independent and became the de facto Republican candidate, backed by

the Bush White House and most state Republican officeholders. He defeated Lamont by 50 percent to 40 percent, aided by Lamont’s virtual dropping of the war issue for much of the fall campaign.

Lieberman pledged to caucus with the Democrats in January, in return for an agreement that he would retain his seniority and committee memberships. He is, however, free to switch to the Republican side, which would overnight put an end to Democratic control of the upper house, making it a 50-50 Senate in which Vice President Dick Cheney would exercise the tie-breaking vote.

Other details of the exit polling suggest the longer-term political crisis facing the Republican Party, as its support was sharply down among those demographic groups whose influence is increasing most rapidly. Among Hispanic voters, support for the Republicans fell from 40 percent in 2004 to 30 percent this year. Young voters, those aged 18 to 29, voted Democratic by a 60-38 percent margin, up from 55-45 two years ago. The war in Iraq was by far the most important issue among youth of college age.

The other major factor in the vote was the growing discontent over deteriorating social and economic conditions. Perhaps the most glaring indication of the gulf between official Washington and the great mass of the working class population was Bush’s remark, at his post-election press conference Wednesday, that the war had outweighed the “good” economic performance in the minds of voters.

“The amazing thing about this election, and what surprised me somewhat,” Bush said, “is that this economy’s strong. And, a lot of times, off years are decided by the economy.”

And yet, you know, obviously there was a different feel out there for the electorate. The economy—the good news in the economy was overwhelmed by the toughness of this fight and toughness of the war.”

In reality, the majority of those going to the polls November 7 regarded the economy as an additional negative for the Bush administration and voted accordingly. According to the exit polling, 39 percent of the voters said the economy was extremely important to their vote, and six out of ten of those voted Democratic.

This was particularly apparent in Ohio, hard hit by the decline of US manufacturing. A huge majority of Ohio voters, 62 percent to 37 percent, viewed the state of the economy as negative. Of those who viewed the economy negatively, 75 percent voted for the Democratic candidate Brown. Of those who saw the economy positively—generally the upper-income bracket—71 percent voted for the Republican DeWine.

There were similar margins in Pennsylvania, another state heavily dependent on manufacturing. In Missouri, 46 percent of the voters said the economy was the most important issue, more even than Iraq, and of these, Democrat Claire McCaskill enjoyed a 61-39 percent margin over Republican James Talent.



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