# Off-year elections in US show continued hostility to Bush, Republicans

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Off-year election results in four states yielded marginal gains for the Democratic Party, with Republican Party officials admitting that even in state legislative races, the war in Iraq and the unpopularity of the Bush administration are the most significant factors in influencing voters.

Democrat Steve Breshear, a former lieutenant governor, defeated the incumbent Republican governor Ernie Fletcher in Kentucky by a landslide margin of 60-40. Fletcher was indicted in a scheme to award state jobs to political cronies, and provoked further outrage by issuing blanket pardons to all his co-conspirators—although not to himself.

The Democrats won control of the state senate in two southern states, Virginia and Mississippi, which have been dominated by the Republican Party in both state and national politics for most of the past two decades. They also retained control of both houses of the state legislature in New Jersey, the most populous state to conduct balloting Tuesday.

The Virginia result had particular significance because of the pronounced shift away from the Republican Party in two areas that are heavily populated by military personnel and the families of civilian defense workers: the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC, where the Pentagon is located, and the Hampton Roads area around Norfolk, the home port for the US Atlantic fleet.

Local press accounts suggested that the Democratic candidates had sought successfully to tie their Republican opponents to the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. The Republicans lost two seats each in the Norfolk area and northern Virginia, more than enough to give the Democrats a narrow 21-19 majority in the state senate. Besides losing control of the upper house, the Republican Party saw its margin in the state assembly, the lower house, cut by three seats.

The Republicans sought to maintain their control with a demagogic campaign on immigration, particularly in the outer suburbs in northern Virginia, where ultra-right groups have staged provocations against immigrant workers.

This racist campaign largely failed. The *Washington Post* noted, in a front-page analysis, that there had been “no fixation on immigration” among voters, despite vast publicity given to the anti-immigrant agitation, which was backed to the hilt by the Republicans and treated with cowardice and doubletalk by the Democrats.

In the weeks before the election, Republicans in the state house and senate introduced legislation to build a massive new state prison for “illegal” immigrants. Prince William County, in the northern Virginia suburbs, enacted an ordinance to deny county services to undocumented immigrants and requiring local police to arrest immigrants without proper papers if they were stopped on suspicion of any offense, no matter how trivial.

While the Republican chairman of the Prince William County Board won reelection, the anti-immigrant campaign had little or no effect in the voting for state offices, as the Republicans lost a state house seat in the county and failed to defeat the incumbent Democratic state senator.

The Virginia results also demonstrated a broader phenomenon: the deepening popular alienation from both the established parties. Turnout was a meager 15 percent of the eligible voters in many areas, exacerbated by the fact that less than half of the seats were actually contested by both parties.

Of the 40 state senate seats, only 19 had two-party contests, while 21 incumbents were returned to office

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essentially unopposed. Of the 100 seats in the lower house, only 32, less than one-third, had two-party contests. In effect, the two parties have divided up the state legislature between them, while agreeing to compete only on the margins.

In Mississippi, Governor Haley Barbour, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, won reelection easily over Democrat John Eaves, a candidate who sought to outdo Barbour in his embrace of the religious right. Eaves promised to restore Christian prayer to the public schools, in defiance of well-established Supreme Court rulings, and called for even tighter restrictions on abortion rights. Barbour was endorsed by a number of prominent Democrats, including former congressman and Clinton cabinet official Mike Espy.

The statewide elections in both Mississippi and Louisiana were heavily influenced by the impact of Hurricane Katrina. The Bush administration funneled a disproportionate share of recovery money to Mississippi (with a Republican governor), at the expense of Louisiana, whose governor was a Democrat.

Governor Barbour profited politically from the largesse, while Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco decided not to seek reelection, effectively ceding her position to Republican Bobby Jindal, the first US governor of South Asian descent.

Two state referendums dealt with major social issues. In Utah, one of the most conservative US states, a plan to establish school vouchers ranging from $500 to $3,000 for children sent to private schools was heavily defeated, despite support from the Republican governor and legislature.

In New Jersey, a ballot measure to initiate a state program to support stem cell research was voted down, with the opposition campaign spearheaded by anti-abortion groups and the Roman Catholic Church.

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