

Republicans make limited gains in off-year US election

A reporter
6 November 2015

Tuesday's off-year election for state offices in Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia and New Jersey, and for local offices across the country, were another demonstration of the deep alienation of the American population from both big business parties.

Turnout was abysmally low, except in a handful of areas where referendum votes were held on contentious social issues. Huge amounts of money were poured into a relatively small number of contests, including two gubernatorial races, both in the South. These factors favored the Republican Party over the Democrats in the November 3 voting.

Republican Matt Bevin won an upset victory for governor of Kentucky, defeating the state's attorney-general Jack Conway, who had been leading narrowly in most pre-election polls. In Mississippi, incumbent Republican Governor Phil Bryant won re-election easily over token Democratic opposition, and the Republicans gained a two-thirds majority in the state legislature.

The third gubernatorial race of 2015, in Louisiana, will be decided in a runoff election November 21. In an all-party primary last month, Democrat John Bel Edwards won 40 percent of the vote and will face Republican US Senator David Vitter, who received 23 percent, to lead all Republican candidates. Edwards is a slight favorite in the runoff to succeed incumbent Republican Bobby Jindal, who is widely hated for savage attacks on public education and health care over the past eight years.

The loss of Kentucky reduces the number of governorships controlled by the Democratic Party to only 19 out of 50 states, down from 32 when Obama was first elected president in 2008. Over the same period, the Democrats have lost more than 900 state legislative seats, giving up control of 30 legislative

chambers, as well as both the US Senate and the House of Representatives.

Bevin is a multi-millionaire investment manager from Louisville who self-financed an unsuccessful challenge to Republican Senator Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, in 2014, and kept on campaigning this year, winning the Republican nomination for governor by a narrow 83-vote margin. He is an extreme Tea Party reactionary who opposes the minimum wage and the expansion of Medicaid, and advocates making Kentucky a right-to-work state. He has called openly for "austerity in the state of Kentucky" and "outsourcing" functions of state government.

The last months of the campaign were dominated by the conflict provoked by Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis, who refused to obey the US Supreme Court decision striking down state barriers to gay marriage. Bevin publicly supported Davis and visited her in jail, and after her release, she switched her party affiliation from Democratic to Republican and called for Bevin's election.

While Bevin benefited from somewhat higher turnout among evangelical Christians, Conway and the Democrats could not rally sufficient support in Louisville, the state's largest city and industrial city, in Lexington and in the eastern Kentucky counties dominated by the coal industry, where most miners are unemployed. Bevin carried 106 of the 120 counties in the state, including Pike County, the center of coal-mining in eastern Kentucky. Overall voter turnout was only 30 percent.

Bevin's running mate for lieutenant governor, Jenean Hampton, will be the first African-American to hold statewide office in Kentucky's 223-year history. Overall, Republicans won four of the six statewide offices despite being outspent by the Democrats,

particularly Conway, whose campaign, together with independent committees supporting him, spent \$8.8 million compared to \$5.5 million for Bevin. Both sums would have been considered gargantuan for a comparatively small state only a few years ago.

A major issue in the campaign was Kentucky's implementation of Obamacare, among the most systematic of any state, with a state-built portal called Kynect, which enrolled more than 400,000 people, most of them to Medicaid, the federal program providing health coverage for the poor. Bevin has pledged to dismantle Kynect but claimed that those insured through it could continue their coverage through the federal portal, healthcare.gov.

The other two statewide elections November 3 involved state legislative positions in Virginia and New Jersey, with small gains for the Democrats in both states. In Virginia, Democrats gained a handful of seats in the House of Delegates, the lower house, which has a top-heavy Republican majority, but gained nothing in the State Senate, which the Republicans control by a narrow 21-19 margin. Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe, a close ally of Hillary Clinton, directed millions of dollars into a handful of close state senate races, but not a single seat changed hands.

In New Jersey, Democrats increased their large majorities, defeating three Republican incumbents in the state assembly, in a campaign largely devoted to attacks on unpopular Republican Governor Chris Christie, who is trailing badly in his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.

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In mayoral elections and other contests in urban areas across the country, the Democratic Party maintained control in its traditional areas of strength, electing mayors in Philadelphia, Indianapolis, San Francisco and Charlotte, North Carolina, among many others.

In Colorado's second-largest school district, Jefferson County in the Denver suburbs, a recall campaign backed by teachers, students and civil liberties groups swept out the three-member ultra-right majority on the school board. The three Republicans had provoked widespread opposition over the past two years, including mass student walkouts, by imposing merit pay on teachers, boosting funding for charter schools, and demanding that history and civics courses

“promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free-enterprise system.” The district includes Columbine High School, the site of one of the first mass school shootings in the US, in 1999.

In Pennsylvania, three Republican members of the state supreme court were defeated for re-election, replaced by Democrats, after the most expensive court election in US history, with more than \$15 million spent on both sides. The Republican judges, normally obscure figures, became notorious because of rulings upholding a restrictive voter ID law.

In Houston, Texas, an ultra-right campaign succeeded in defeating an anti-discrimination law enacted by the City Council and backed by the city's outgoing three-term mayor, Democrat Annise D. Parker. The right-wing campaign was spearheaded by fundamentalist pastors and the state's Republican lieutenant governor Dan Patrick, a former talk-radio host, who appealed to anti-gay bigotry with television ads suggesting that men would invade public women's restrooms if the referendum was passed.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, home of the Mormon Church, an openly gay woman was elected mayor, defeating a two-term incumbent.



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