Takeaways from election: A very good night for the GOP

Kathleen Gray, Detroit Free Press Lansing Bureau *1:10 a.m. EST November 6, 2014*



(Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

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The 2014 election season has come to a close with some surprises, razor-thin margins in races across the state and a political landscape that has developed a decidedly red tint.

"In the context of this election, Republicans did a better job of getting their voters out," said Tom Shields, a political consultant with the Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group. "Democrats didn't complete the job. They got a lot of absentee ballots out there, but they had some real trouble getting people to turn them back in."

So the takeaways from this year's election:

A very bad night for Dems

An unprecedented effort to get Democratic voters out to the polls — the party sent out more than 1 million absentee ballot applications, mostly to voters who traditionally vote in presidential election years, but not midterm contests — fell flat.

Fewer voters cast ballots this year than in 2010 and the results were palpable. Republicans picked up four seats in the state House of Representatives, knocking off two Democratic incumbents — state Reps. Theresa Abed of Grand Ledge and Collene Lamonte of Montague by a combined total of 368 votes out of 60,536 cast — and picking up two open seats that had been held by Democrats. The GOP now has a 63-47 majority in the House.

In the state Senate, four hotly contested seats all went to Republicans, including one in southwest Michigan where state Rep. Margaret O'Brien, R-Portage, beat state Rep. Sean McCann, D-Kalamazoo, by 60 votes. The GOP now holds a veto-proof majority of 27-11.

"We never thought in our wildest dreams that turnout would be worse than in 2010," said state Rep. Brandon Dillon, D-Grand Rapids, the chairman of the House Democratic Campaign Committee. "This seems to be the pattern of the last two gubernatorial election cycles, we just got wave election after wave election."

Shields said it was just a huge night for Republicans.

"Everything broke the Republicans' way in legislative races," he said.

Top of ticket decisive

Gov. Rick Snyder won with a 4-percentage-point margin, while Attorney General Bill Schuette and Secretary of State Ruth Johnson won with slightly bigger margins.

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Solid victory for Snyder, but legacy still in question

Shields attributed the gubernatorial win to the GOP and Snyder's campaign making sure that enough supporters got to the polls to make up for the increased numbers of senior citizens voting against the governor because of a tax on pensions.

Ticket splitters

U.S. Rep. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township, won his race for U.S. Senate over former Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land, R-Byron Center, by the biggest margin among the statewide races. He won by more than 13 percentage points.

In addition, Democrats won all but one seat on the state Board of Education and three university governing boards races.



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Gary Peters applauds on stage with U.S. Senator Carl Levin, right, and U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow after winning Levin's seat. *(Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)*

The only Democrat to lose was incumbent Faylene Owen in the race for Michigan State University Board of Trustees. She was defeated by Melanie Foster, a former MSU board member who lost a bid for re-election in 2012.

Shields said more Democrats typically vote a straight-party ticket, leading to the education-related wins as some Republicans apparently skipped voting in those races.

No surprises for Congress or court

All the incumbents won their re-election bids, other than U.S. Rep. Kerry Bentivolio, R-Milford, who lost his race in the August primary — and who ran as a write-in in the general election.

Because the congressional districts have been drawn in such a way to favor one political party or another, the results of the five open seats were never in much jeopardy.

And the Supreme Court will continue to have a 5-2 Republican majority. Both incumbent justices — Brian Zahra and David Viviano — won their re-election bids. Newcomer Richard Bernstein won, too.

Pot issues mixed bag

The larger communities with proposals on the ballot ended up supporting decriminalization or relaxed law enforcement priorities. The cities of Berkley, Huntington Woods, Pleasant Ridge, Port Huron and Mt. Pleasant all passed marijuana proposals.

Smaller communities — Lapeer, Clare, Frankfort, Harrison and Onaway — defeated marijuana ballot proposals.

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