



Experts struggle to analyze voters' picks

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SPRINGFIELD - Career politicians and small business owners. Downstate Republicans and Chicago Democrats.

The primary election results don't fit into pundits' pocket protectors, and the juxtaposition of candidates has some commentators asking, 'What happened?'

Kitty Kurth, president of political consulting firm Kurth Lampe of Chicago, said this year's primary was unpredictable from the outset. Headed into Tuesday she'd told reporters she hadn't a clue what was going to happen. At week's end she was still struggling.

"Tuesday came and went and I still have no friggin' clue what happened," said Kurth, who worked for one of the unsuccessful state treasurer campaigns.

The list of Tuesday's victors is an eclectic one. Despite the ballyhooed anti-incumbent, conservative tea party revolution, moderate Republican Mark Kirk, a five-term congressman from Highland Park, won the party nomination for U.S. Senate in a landslide.

Across the ticket, former federal prosecutor and respected Chicago ethics watchdog David Hoffman was the favorite of reformers coming off a 2009 filled with political scandal. But Hoffman was beaten by Illinois Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias despite questions about investment losses on his watch and how his family bank conducts business.

Not only did Giannoulias win, but his chief of staff Robin Kelly won the nomination for state treasurer.

Democratic voters also chose to stick with Gov. Pat Quinn even as he promised to keep fighting to raise taxes in a year with an unbalanced budget of historic proportions. The GOP, meanwhile, will head into the governor's race with a nominee who didn't win a single suburban county - something many political observers considered all but impossible.

Former Gov. Jim Edgar attributed the theatrical win of Bloomington state Sen. Bill Brady to the three-way split of local votes between former Republican Party Chairman Andy McKenna of Chicago, former Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan of Elmhurst and state Sen. Kirk Dillard of Hinsdale. Brady, meanwhile, rallied downstate voters to nudge him to the party's forefront.

"The key factor was geography. It wasn't ideology," Edgar said.

And then there were the two neophyte lieutenant governor victors - Democrat Scott Lee Cohen and Republican Jason Plummer - who largely self-financed their campaigns out of obscurity, besting fields of established candidates to possibly next be a heartbeat away from the governor's office.

With such a hodgepodge of candidates moving into the general election, Kurth said the most revealing mentality of the electorate may belong to the voters who didn't show at the polls.

"The one overwhelming truth that happens every time in a low turnout primary is strange things happen," Kurth said. "This is the problem in a low turnout election. All politics is local and you can't make any

generalizations."

In the 8th Congressional District, Joe Walsh's Republican win was steeped in the tea party revolution. But that movement diluted statewide where Hinsdale businessman Adam Andrzejewski managed to win a few counties but ultimately may have served as a conservative spoiler in the six-way GOP governor race. Governor hopeful Brady is a social and fiscal conservative but not the favored candidate of that movement.

As returns rolled in Tuesday, House Republican leader Tom Cross was similarly left wondering what message to take from voters. "They're scared, they're frustrated, they're angry. Who knows what drives people?" he said.

Some political observers blamed the low turnout and lack of enthusiasm on the February primary, weeks ahead of the traditional date.

"And one indicator of that is that the vast majority of voters didn't bother to show up," said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, a nonpartisan watchdog group based in Chicago. "It was a very fast paced, negative campaign coming out of the holiday."

Tuesday's primary had fewer than 1.7 million voters cast ballots for the governor's race, compared to more than 1.8 million gubernatorial voters in 2006. The results four years ago already marked the lowest collective turnout for a statewide primary since 1960.

"It was such a short timeline in so many ways," Canary said of the February primary. "There was none of that feel-good campaigning."

Illinois political historian Charles N. Wheeler III, a professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said the low turnout was ironic considering the disgust many Illinoisans directed at officeholders following Blagojevich's arrest in late 2008.

"Despite all this supposed outrage among voters and all this sentiment of 'throw the bums out' stoked by some editorial boards, in reality, roughly three out of four registered voters didn't feel sufficiently engaged or impassioned or motivated to bother to vote," Wheeler said.

Daily Herald staff writer John Patterson contributed to this report.