

Voters push change at White House, but not statehouse

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SPRINGFIELD - Suburban voters turned out in droves to back Barack Obama's message of "change" last week, but on the state front, they sent back to Springfield nearly all the same people who've produced the gridlock that was said to be frustrating the electorate.

Only two incumbents - both Republicans - lost re-election bids.

"It certainly didn't change anything in Illinois," said Christopher Mooney, a political studies professor at the University of Illinois' Springfield campus. "You can't say this was transformational."

So while Illinois voters may expect different policies and action out of Washington, D.C., it remains uncertain whether anything new will be coming from the state Capitol, which holds arguably as much, if not more, sway over their taxes, health care and education.

The state has been mired in political stasis for years, unable to strike a deal on construction spending and increasingly using unbalanced budgets as political tools in bruising personal battles among the Democratic leaders.

Polling suggested that voters are becoming fed up with the situation, but that doesn't appear to have shown up in Tuesday's results.

The Illinois Senate will have the exact same Democratic majority - 37-22 - it had before. And Democrats picked up three seats in the Illinois House to pad their majority there to 70-48.

Voters also said "no" to a constitutional convention that was touted as being able to possibly fix complex issues such as education funding that have long stymied lawmakers.

So does all this indicate that gridlock isn't as big an issue as lawmakers and political observers have been made it out to be?

"I don't think you can expect voters to be consistent all the time or for (varied election results) to be totally rationale. And a lot of it is marketing, who does the better marketing," said longtime state government watcher Charlie Wheeler, who directs the Public Affairs Reporting Program, also at the University of Illinois' Springfield campus. "My guess is most voters hold their local lawmaker in higher esteem than they do the legislature as an institution."

Republicans had hoped to capitalize on voter dissatisfaction with Springfield gridlock and an increasingly unpopular Gov. Rod Blagojevich, by arguing that real change meant sending more GOP lawmakers to the state Capitol. The Republican Party launched a radio ad with that message a week before the election.

The ad and a uniform message linking opponents to Blagojevich are credited with stemming potential losses in the face of an aggressive Democratic push in the suburbs.

But Republicans still failed to make any gains, as largely the same politicians from both sides were sent back to Springfield after years of being a party to the ongoing mess.

"I think I can only speak to House races and there, voters across Illinois seem to be supportive of the common-sense approach to problem solving that Michael Madigan has applied throughout his career and especially in the last couple years," said Madigan spokesman Steve Brown. Madigan is the Illinois House Speaker and chairman of the state's Democratic Party.

Yet, residents may see some change come to Springfield, although it's not coming through any voter intent.

The single biggest shift will come in the election of a new Senate president. Chicago's Emil Jones Jr. is stepping down from the post where he'd led the fight for embattled Gov. Rod Blagojevich's policies and turned the Senate into a loyal ally of the governor in a growing political feud with the House.

Jones' successor won't officially be selected until new lawmakers are seated in January and vote on their leadership. But numerous Democrats are seeking the post, raised money for fellow candidates this election season and an internal deal for the Senate presidency could come within weeks.

Similarly, Senate Republicans are looking for a new leader after Greenville's Frank Watson, who recently suffered a stroke, announced he will step away from the post. That news immediately set off similar jockeying among the fewer than two dozen GOP senators who must now choose Watson's successor from their ranks.

A key question yet to be answered from the Senate leadership scramble is how the future Senate will work with the Illinois House, where Madigan remains in control with 70 members and Republican leader Tom Cross of Oswego is expected to continue leading what will be 48 GOP members.

Madigan and his members have thwarted the governor's plans for gambling expansion, leasing out the lottery and creating a new tax on business revenue.

Brown said gridlock is not Madigan's goal.

"We're always willing to work with anyone who's willing to apply a common-sense approach to problem solving. So if they're out there, we're willing to work with them," he said.

With the 2008 elections barely in the books, focus is already turning to 2010 when all 118 Illinois House seats are again on the ballot and, more importantly, the governor's mansion and other statewide offices are back on the ballot.

Republicans already say that election is do or die for the GOP as those lawmakers and that governor will control the drawing of the state's next political map following the 2010 census. If Democrats continue to control all posts, they can tweak the map and effectively banish Republicans to minority political status for another decade.

"The next election will either be a beginning of a new Republican Party," said Des Plaines Republican state Rep. Rosemary Mulligan, "or a death knell."