

Christie's coattails carry few to victory

By DANIEL WALSH Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, November 4, 2009 |

Chris Christie may have had coattails, but they extended only so far statewide.

Republicans tightened races at nearly all levels of government in Tuesday's elections, but aside from the gubernatorial race, they picked up few major gains.

The party picked up an Assembly seat in the Fourth District - where Domenick DiCicco defeated Bill Collins - along with some local gains, such as the shift from Democratic to Republican control on Township Committee in Cumberland County's Upper Deerfield Township.

But many races were a lot closer than in years past.

"It was a rough year to be a Democrat," said state Sen. Steve Sweeney, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland. "We did OK. The margins were tighter. This was like a (former Gov. James) Florio year brewing. We had towns where we'd win by 3,000 (in the past), and we won by 450 (this year). They weren't enough to knock us out, but it was enough to make the margins closer."

Sweeney, who stands in line to become the state government's top-ranked elected Democrat if he becomes Senate president next year, as many expect, even failed to deliver his home county for Gov. Jon S. Corzine.

"I really believe there were coattails," Sweeney said. "I believe a lot of people went straight down the column, and that's why the margins were so close."

Assemblywoman Celeste Riley, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, eked out her first victory by only 1,217 votes out of 27,228 cast, despite her Republican challengers having little funding or organized party support. Republicans picked up seats in Upper Deerfield, Downe and Greenwich townships in Cumberland County. They were similarly competitive in Gloucester County, picking up seats in a half-dozen municipalities and providing a rare competitive race for freeholder.

Republican activists Jim Swift and Jim Sauro, who both ran unsuccessfully for freeholder in 2008 with 2009 winner Tom Sheppard, noticed the trends, too, as they watched the returns trickle in Tuesday night in Vineland.

For example, Sauro was amazed when he saw returns for a downtown Vineland voting district showing a 189-160 victory for Democrat Lauren Van Embden in the Cumberland County clerk's

race. Republicans usually lose by far more there, and Van Embden eventually fell short in her effort to unseat incumbent Republican County Clerk Gloria Noto.

"That's not the norm," Sauro said Tuesday night of that district's returns. "In these districts, I've seen (U.S. Rep.) Frank LoBiondo not get votes there. There's something going on with this election."

Some think this was a year of the message vote. But in the final tally, the state Legislature will look almost exactly the same next year, despite Christie's wide victory margin (49 percent to 45 percent) over Corzine.

"Given the width of the Christie win, one can question why there weren't more wins in the Legislature," said Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics.

He said he suspects it may be because many districts are gerrymandered to strongly favor one party or the other, as well as the potential that many Republican candidates simply weren't strong options.

"It's not like the Florio year, when it was 'Kick the bums out,'" said Sharon Schulman, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. "It was a strong commentary on Gov. Corzine, not on everyone else. But it was a strong message that says, 'You better do something.'"

Assemblyman John Burzichelli certainly heard the message. He said Corzine's positive momentum wilted about six days before Election Day, but he felt the difficulty of the race long before that. He felt he was running against a public sentiment more than any particular candidate, and much of it driven by the poor economy.

"First of all, many people don't know what an assemblyman is," said Burzichelli, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland. "But if they do know you, you often build relationships. It's sort of a 'We hate Congress, but we love our congressman' sort of thing."

State Assemblymen Matt Milam and Nelson Albano, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, appeared to fit that category, posting comfortable wins over Republican challengers John McCann and Mike Donohue in the First District.

Christie won the historically Republican stronghold of Cape May County by more than 5,000 votes, but Albano lost there by less than 200 votes, despite both Donohue and McCann being county residents. Albano and Milam cleaned up in their home county of Cumberland by about 5,000 and 4,000 votes respectively, defying the Republican coattails for a win in what many had believed would be the state's closest race. They did it in part by billing themselves as independent from Corzine and the state Democratic Party, something many voters apparently believed.

"It just shows we're about representing District 1 first, and the rest of the state after," Milam said.

Contact Daniel Walsh:

856-649-2074

DWalsh@pressofac.com

© 1970-2009 Press of Atlantic City Media Group