

Democrats' tide hits Legislature

The tide that flowed for Democrats nationally has seeped into the Washington legislative election, giving Gov. Christine Gregoire's political party a commanding majority of both houses of the Washington Legislature.

Political change spread over much of the state, from Eastern Washington to the east side of Lake Washington.

As always, it isn't clear what the implications are for Washington State University and higher education. But certainly there are political impacts. There are strong friends of the university and higher education in both political parties. There were supporters that were elected on Tuesday but there were also some that were defeated. Too often, there were supporters that ran against each other.

Tuesday's election took a slim 26-23 Democratic majority in the Senate this year and delivered Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, D-Spokane, the largest Democratic majority in more than 40 years. There will be 32 Democratic senators and just 17 Republican senators in the 2007 Legislative session. The new majority leaves Democrats just one vote short of the two-thirds necessary to amend the state constitution.

The new, larger Senate Democratic caucus will now decide how to restructure the Senate. The Senate Democrats will meet this weekend in SeaTac. Among other things, they will decide in the coming weeks whether higher education and K-12 education will continue to be in a single committee. For many years, there was a separate higher education committee in the Senate.

The 55-43 majority that Speaker Frank Chopp has had in the state House of Representatives appears to have extended to a minimum of at least eight more seats. If election trends hold, it will be a 63-45 Democratic majority. However, there are two very tight races where Democrats could push their majority to 65 in late counting. In the 10th Legislative District, Democrat Tim Knue trails Republican Barbara Bailey by just 28 votes in the Skagit-Snohomish District. Nearby in the 39th Legislative District that also touches King County, Democrat Scott Olson trails Rep. Dan Kristiansen by just 414 votes out of 23,000 counted.

The new larger majorities bring hope that the Legislature will not bog down next year and extend the scheduled 105-day session. But it will also put more pressure on legislative leaders to hold their members in line on crucial votes, as larger caucuses tend to splinter into smaller caucuses. It will also force minority Republican leaders to be more creative on how they can impact a process where the opposing party has such a large working majority.

Already before the election, significant changes were in the works. Mark Doumit, D-Cathlamet, a WSU graduate who organized the writing of the operating budget on the Senate Ways and Means Committee, resigned from the Senate Nov. 1. The Democratic majority must now determine who will perform some of the budgetary roles previously performed by Doumit. Among possible successors to Sen. Doumit are former Rep. Brian Hatfield, a longtime WSU supporter. A decision on Doumit's successor should be made later this month.

The new, larger House Democratic caucus is planning to meet Nov. 19th to determine leaders and decide how to organize committees. Rep. Helen Sommers, D-Seattle, a strong supporter of the research universities, is

expected to continue as chair of the House Appropriations Committee. But there are some significant leadership positions that need to be filled including the chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

Analysts consider the Democratic victories at the state and national levels to be tied to a relatively slight shift by moderate voters. In Washington, that shift was most apparent in Spokane's 6th Legislative District, a district that Democrats previously failed many times to win despite strong well-financed campaigns.

There, Spokane Businessman Chris Marr, a member of the WSU Board of Regents, collected more than 56 percent of the vote to defeat Sen. Brad Benson. Marr becomes only the second senator in the Democratic caucus east of the Cascade Mountains (the other is Sen. Brown.) Also in the sixth district, Democratic challenger Don Barlow, a member of the Spokane Public Schools Board and an instructor at Spokane Community College, defeated state Rep. John Serben, with 53 percent of the vote. He becomes just the fourth Democrat from Eastern Washington in the House. The Democratic tide did not strike every Republican incumbent uniformly. That same 6th district returned Republican Rep. John Ahern to the House with more than 58 percent of the vote, a larger percentage than either Marr or Barlow.

House Democratic Caucus Chair Bill Grant, D-Prescott, was among the few Eastern Washington Democrats and was thought early this year to be in a tough fight for re-election in the Walla Walla/Tri-Cities District. However, Grant easily beat his Republican challenger with more than 60 percent of the vote. In the same district, Republican Rep. Maureen Walsh won re-election with 64 percent of the vote.

An open seat in the 13th legislative district, provided Central Washington with a new Republican state senator. Rep. Janea Holmquist will now become Sen. Holmquist after collecting more than 66 percent of the vote in that Columbia Basin district.

State Rep. Don Cox, R-Colfax, who has been a strong supporter of WSU in the Legislature and worked on many other education issues as well, did not seek re-election. Cox's ninth district represents both WSU Pullman and Eastern Washington University. Mark Schoesler of Ritzville is the senator, and not up for election. Republican Steve Hailey, a Mesa farmer, received 60 percent of the vote to replace Cox. Rep. David Buri, a member of the House Higher Education Committee, won re-election without opposition.

Changes on the East side of Lake Washington are likely to leave the Senate Republican caucus with fewer moderate members from swing districts. State Sen. Dave Schmidt, R-Everett, was upset by Democrat Steve Hobbs, who currently has 54.5 percent of the vote. State Sen. Luke Esser, Democrat Rodney Tom appears to have defeated Sen. Luke Esser, also with about 54 percent of the vote. A Democrat appears to have taken the seat for Sen. Stephen Johnson, who was unsuccessful in his run for the state supreme court. Democrat Claudia Kauffman leads her Republican opponent by about 1,100 votes in the King County district.

Some prominent Republican House and Senate members from swing districts were in unusually tight races. Rep. Fred Jarrett is winning for re-election with 52.7 percent of the vote. State Sen. Dale Brandland, who led efforts on the capital construction budget, is leading his Democrat challenger with only 51 percent of the vote. Rep. Skip Priest won re-election more easily with 57 percent of the vote.

Rep. Jim Dunn, a member of the House Higher Education Committee from the Vancouver area, appears to have been defeated by Democrat Pat Campbell. Dunn trails by about 700 votes.

Other incumbent House members that appear to have been defeated include, Rep. Jim Buck (who trails by more than 3,300 votes) and Rep. Toby Nixon, who trails by more than 2,200 votes behind Democrat Eric Oernig, and Rep. Jan Shabro, R-Sumner (who trails by about 2,000 votes).