

POST-ELECTION REPORT 2006

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The Oklahoma 2006 elections are over and according to media reports over \$24,000,000.00 was spent in Oklahoma on media, consultants, postage, mailing, and less than \$300,000.00 on newspaper advertising. What did the expenditure of all that money accomplish?

If you are a Democrat in Oklahoma, you should be absolutely ecstatic that of the nine state-wide offices on the ballot, Democrats won eight of those. Democrat Lloyd Fields upset long time incumbent Republican Brenda Reneau to become the new Labor Commissioner. Jari Askins, the House Minority Leader and a Democrat, beat her former rival, Speaker Todd Hiatt, a Republican, to replace Republican Mary Fallin as Oklahoma's Lt. Governor. The Lt. Governor's position takes on the most importance ever in the history of Oklahoma. In the 100 year history of this state, not once have the Republicans controlled the State Senate, but in 2006 they got close. The Oklahoma State Senate is now tied 24 Democrats and 24 Republicans with the Lt. Governor Democrat Askins being able to cast a vote in case of a tie thus giving (on paper) the Democrats control of the State Senate again.

If you're an active Republican, what you gleaned out of the 2006 Oklahoma elections is a continued superiority at the Congressional level where Republicans control four of the five Oklahoma Congressional seats. Also, you can brag as incoming House Speaker Elect Lance Cargill did that in 2006 the best opportunity for Democrats to pick up seats in the Oklahoma House. Democrats not only did not pick up any seats, there remains the exact same number of Republicans to Democrats as at the end of the 2006 legislative session. Cargill will assume the Speakership on February 2, 2007 and have a comfortable majority of Republicans to Democrats to negotiate with the Democrat Governor as well as the evenly split Senate. Former Senate Minority Leader Glenn Coffee (R) can also brag that for the first time in the history of Oklahoma there are 24 Republican members of the Senate and through Coffee's leadership has brought what he hopes is parity to that body. Coffee, immediately after the election, was hopeful that the Senate Democratic Leader Mike Morgan from Stillwater would share power with the Senate Republicans instead of fostering an environment of partisanship. The good news is Senators Morgan and Coffee, both attorneys, both friends, have (on behalf of their respective caucus) decided to share power instead of a bitter partisanship fight that the Oklahoma public probably does not want and may not tolerate.

The further great news for Oklahoma Democrats is that popular Governor Brad Henry was re-elected to a second and last four year term by an over-whelming majority of the Oklahoma voters over former Congressman Earnest Istook, Republican. Henry generated more votes and a wider percentage victory over Istook than any Governor in the last forty years. Of the 77 counties, Henry only lost the three small counties in the panhandle whose newspapers, radio and TV markets are from Texas and Kansas. Democrats will claim Henry was given a mandate to continue his support for public education, healthcare, jobs and the economy. Republicans will claim it was just a very popular and well funded incumbent running against a poorly funded candidate who ran a surprisingly poor campaign for Governor. Many will also wonder if Governor Henry had coattails which were long enough to make sure that other Democrats running for statewide office benefited from them. Polling that I was privileged to see in the closing days of the campaign indicated that Henry did have coattails and Democrats should embrace Governor Henry, his bi-partisanship actions, as well as his stances on public education and the other parts of his platform. Specifically, Jari Askins and Lloyd Fields, running for Lt. Governor and Labor Commissioner respectively, probably benefited from the Henry coattails more than other statewide Democratic candidates who were already incumbents with the exception of Cody Graves running for Corporation Commissioner against popular incumbent Bob Anthony. The Henry coattails do not appear to have had any impact on State Senate or State House races and those were basically local issues and local politics. In areas such as Pontotoc and Comanche County where the Democrat registration is overwhelmingly higher than the Republican, Republican House members won those seats on local issues and their own personal hard work. On the other hand, in Kay County, a Democrat won a seat that had been held by Republican State Representatives for many, many years. Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neil said all politics are local. In Oklahoma at the county, the State House and the State Senate level Tip O'Neil's quote once again proved correct.

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How do the 2006 elections change the Oklahoma political landscape? At the federal level the changes are minimum at best. Oklahoma has only five members of the U.S. House of Representatives, four Republicans and one Democrat. That did not change with the recent elections. All those incumbents running for re-election to include John Sullivan in CD-1, Dan Boren in CD-2, Frank Lucas in CD-3 and Tom Cole in CD-4 all easily won re-election. Of those four members of Congress, only Dan Boren is a Democrat. The only open seat for Congress in Oklahoma was Congressional District 5 which long-term incumbent Earnest Istook vacated to run for Governor on the Republican ticket. Istook's seat, at one time, looked that it may become competitive, but with Lt. Governor Mary Fallin winning the nomination for the Republicans, it became clear that she would go on to victory in November. Her opponent, Medical Doctor David Hunter, ran a good race, but he was clearly under funded and the national Republican Party was not going to lose a seat that they had held for over thirty years. Dr. Hunter attempted to talk about the issues but did not receive the financial support from the national Democratic Party that would have allowed him to be competitive on TV and talk about health care, Iraq and other topics. How the political landscape will change at the federal level is that our two U.S. Senators, who are Republicans, and four out of our five members of the U.S. House are Republicans, will no longer be in the majority party. Senator Jim Inhofe will lose chairmanship of his powerful committee. Congressman Tom Cole, a leader in the Republican Congress, may no longer have the clout that he had as a member of the majority party. The only member of the majority party from the Oklahoma federal delegation will be Congressman Dan Boren from Muskogee. Dan, an up and coming young Congressman, has constantly voted with the blue dogs or the conservative to moderate coalition of House Democrats. Dan Boren, who is the son of former United States Senator and current President of the University of Oklahoma, David Boren has been mentioned numerous times to be a candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2008 if Republican incumbent Jim Inhofe decides not to run for re-election. The other interesting news, at the federal level, is that Congressman Tom Cole was successful in his internal political race to become the chairman of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee for the next two years. This position is considered by many political pundits as stepping stone towards a significant leadership position within your own political party. Cole, an experienced political consultant and considered by many in both political parties a political genius will be a formidable leader of the RCCC for the next two years. How that will impact Oklahoma is not yet known. Most political observers in Oklahoma believe that Cole's ascension to the chairmanship of the RCCC means he will spend more time out of state than in state trying to swell the number of Republican members of Congress in the 2008 election.

How do the 2006 Oklahoma elections really impact politics, policy and the people? I think the 2006 elections gave a clear indication that bipartisanship was important in the re-election of Oklahoma popular Governor Brad Henry. Henry was perceived by the voters to be a person that governed from the middle. Henry not only supported the creation of an Oklahoma education lottery, he also championed massive tax cuts for the people. Henry's pro-public education position is extremely popular with almost all Oklahomans and translated into Republican votes as well as registered Democrats that had been traditionally voting Republican. What Henry's re-election did not do was give the Democrats control of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, nor clear control of the Oklahoma State Senate. The 2006 elections did change the make-up of statewide elected officials where Democrats now control eight of the eleven statewide elected offices. It did not have impact at the local level. I would say the 2006 elections did again remind all of us that all politics are local and that Oklahoma is truly a two party state. In 2006 the Democrats may have had the best opportunity to gain seats in the State House and State Senate and were not successful. The Republicans maintaining the status quo in the State House and gaining seats in the State Senate have been described by many pundits as a trend. The real conclusion of the 2006 elections is that the voters did mandate that the far right and the far left should not govern Oklahoma. The voters, in my opinion, sent a clear signal that they want public education, healthcare and jobs in the economy addressed and less time spent on issues that are fringe in nature and only attract support from a small special interest group or the left and/or the right of a political party. The 2006 elections were good and healthy for Oklahoma. The cost was outlandish and of course the real beneficiaries of the November election were those that own television stations who received the lion's share of all campaign dollars. The next two years will be very interesting as the Democrats control the statewide offices and the Republicans control or are tied in the Legislature. I believe that compromise and cooperation will be the two words for the next two years as both political parties gear up for the Presidential election of 2008. Of course my partner Jim Dunlap is still hoping for Republican State domination and I guess he will have to just have to keep reciting the words to the Dusty Springfield song "wishin and hopin"!

OKLAHOMA 2006 STATE ELECTION ANALYSIS

By Jim Dunlap



The General Election of 2006 will be looked at by most in Oklahoma as big victory for the Democrat Party in that they retained and picked up Statewide Office holdings and will take comfort in that their national party regained control of congress for the first time in twelve years. They should be happy with most of their victories and proud of the top of their ticket Governor Henry.

Governor Henry ran a great campaign and raised more money than anyone could imagine for a state the size of Oklahoma and spent it wisely and had experienced politico's run the campaign. Starting off with a 51% to 39 % registered advantage would seem to help any Democrat win in Oklahoma, but the Governor won by much more and throughout Oklahoma party voting did NOT seem to be a big factor. The Democrats may have missed their best opportunity for the next many years in that they did not field candidates in legislative seats that they would have been competitive in for gains in the legislature.

The Lt. Governor's race drew a lot of attention for the possibility that the State Senate might end up tied after the election, which meant with a popular Governor to lose net two seats out of only 15 that were contested. Democrat House Leader Jari Askins regained the Lt. Gov's office for the Democrats over Speaker Todd Hiatt, which kept history consistent that sitting Speakers have not been elected to statewide office in state history because they have to make decisions which will alienate voters on one or many subjects and in the end cost you votes. Askins also was able to fund her campaign with personal money and was able to keep her message in front of the voters for a longer period of time before the election, still only winning by less than 15,000 votes out of some 924,000 cast. This was the first evidence of no coattails from the Governor.

The only other big surprise on the statewide ballot was the victory for Democrat Labor commission Lloyd Field who squeaked by with 2600 votes to spare. As Oklahoma was in the cycle to not have a US Senate seat on the ballot and of course not being a Presidential election, this should have been a catastrophic year for the Republicans, but it was not. Corporation Commissioner Bob Anthony a three term Republican received 59% of the vote against a former statewide office holder for the Democrats. Oklahoma continues to move towards the Republican Candidates even in the best year for Democrats.

The legislature is proof enough of the afore mentioned support for Republicans as the GOP took control of the House of Representative for only the second time in State history in 2004 and for the first time in 80 years. This election was historic also for them in that they retained control for the first time ever. House seats that should have been competitive for the Democrats to regain some of their losses in 04 were not even close. They did pick up a swing seat from two Republican incumbents, and two open Republican seats that will continue to swing, but lost two Democrat open seats and lost two more that should not have even been in play. In those two seats registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by more that two to one and yet Republicans won. So much for a popular Governor at the top of the ticket. Two more seats that the Democrats lost that were open could stay in Republican hands for quite a period of time.

The State Senate was where the real battleground was at for most of this campaign season and as Election Day drew near and the national trends began to impact down the line, it was expected that the Democrats would hold their majority they have had since statehood. But once again the voters did not stay home with their Democrat Registration and Republicans picked up one open Democrat seat and won against a Democrat incumbent to tie the Senate at 24 each. Now that question of the Lt. Gov's race could play to the impact of the Senate and how they organize, but at the time of this writing that had not occurred.

As the dust settles on this election of 2006 and the view back on it, the Democrats will be kicking themselves for opportunity missed and the Republicans will realize that they dodged a bullet and were not even scratched. Oklahoma continues to turn more and more a red state and the next election in 2008 could send the Republicans into the majority for a long time, no matter what my friend Pat Hall says.
