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Democrats seize state Senate

Slim margin in downstate races overturn majority

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The single most powerful institution in the history of New York state politics has fallen: Senate Republicans have lost the majority after controlling the chamber for all but one year of the past seven decades.

Democrats seized two seats from the Republicans, picked up one vacant seat, and protected their most hotly challenged incumbent, while the GOP picked up one vacant seat and preserved two hotly contested Republican seats.

Democrats hold 32 seats in the state Senate, Republicans hold 29, with one seats that is too close to call.

Democrat Brian Foley defeated Republican Sen. Caesar Trunzo on Long Island, 59 to 41 percent, 63,054 to 44,480.

Democrat Joseph Addabbo beat Sen. Serphin Maltese in Queens, 57 to 43 percent, 40,084 to 29,637.

In the Capital Region, Republican Roy McDonald beat Democrat Mike Russo, 59 to 39 percent, 76,990 to 50,662.

Republican Mike Ranzenhofer beat Democrat Joseph "Baby Joe" Mesi, 54 to 46 percent, 62,146 to 53,985, to replace retiring Republican Sen. Mary Lou Rath in western New York.

Democratic Sen. William Stachowski and Republican Sen. Dale Volker in western New York, and Long Island Republican Sen. Kemp Hannon fended off challengers in hotly contested races.

The outcome of the race between Republican Sen. Frank Padavan and Democratic New York City Councilman in Queens ended Tuesday with the candidates separated by fewer than 800 votes. (41,820 for Padavan to Gennaro's 41,097 votes).

"Today, change begins," said Senate Democratic Leader Malcolm A. Smith, who is expected to become Senate majority leader when the Democrats take over in January.

"There is much at stake for New York families and we are committed to delivering for the people of this great state without the excessive partisanship that has stalled progress in Albany. We will rebuild New York's economy, protect middle income families, get New York working again, and make government more accountable."

Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos attributed the Senate loss to Barack Obama's landslide victory in the presidential race.

"The fact that the Senate Republicans maintained so many seats against such tremendous odds is a testament to the hard work of our incumbents and candidates, and to the importance of the issues they've fought for on behalf of the people of this state," Skelos said in a statement.

Skelos, who replaced Sen. Joseph L. Bruno as majority leader in July when he retired, pledged to

cooperate with the Democrats and "will not lose sight of what is important to the people of this state, such as reducing the crushing burden of taxation and maintaining the quality of life that New Yorkers have come to expect."

"While our numbers will be fewer, our voice will grow louder, and we will continue our fight to maintain balance and ensure an accountable government that represents all of the people throughout every region of the state."

Despite the GOP's long-standing hold on the Senate, Democrats have slowly picked off seats in traditionally Republican strongholds in recent years, particularly upstate and in suburban districts. The GOP went into the Tuesday election with a slim one-seat majority.

The Senate represented the last bastion of Republican power in state government. In January, Democrats will control every statewide office and the Assembly, and occupy both U.S. Senate seats, as well as 26 of 29 of the state's congressional seats.

Democrats and Republicans have already spent a combined \$40 million in this election cycle, according to an analysis of the latest campaign filings by the New York Public Interest Research Group. Spending by campaigns, parties and third-party interest groups on the November election and two special elections in 2006 and 2007 will likely make this legislative election cycle the most expensive in state history. In recent weeks, both sides have deployed hundreds of staffers and volunteers throughout the state in key races.

The Senate majority controls hundreds of staff positions, millions in pork-barrel spending, appointments and, along with the Assembly and governor, determines the state's \$121 billion budget. With such high stakes, especially as the state faces significant budget cuts in the coming months, powerful special interests, including health care and teachers' unions, have invested significant resources in the race by spending millions of dollars on television ads and mailings and sending thousands of members to phone banks and field operations.

The Senate will remain in GOP control until January, which will complicate negotiations during the Nov. 18 special legislative session called by Gov. David Paterson to address the state's \$1.5 billion budget deficit. Skelos and Paterson have traded barbs in recent weeks over the governor's efforts to help Senate Democrats win the majority.

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