

A Deeper Dive into Minnesota Election Results

Alert

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A drawn out and expensive election cycle that saw near-record voter turnout, along with extraordinary tension due to public health crises and social unrest, came to a conclusion last week with a familiar outcome: split control of the Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota continues to be the only such state in the entire nation.

Speaker of the House Melissa Hortman (DFL – Brooklyn Park) and Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka (R – Brainerd) will return to lead their caucuses, both with smaller margins, into one of the most challenging legislative sessions in recent memory. In addition to continuing to deal with the ongoing pandemic, lawmakers must also grapple with a \$5 billion budget deficit.

Several key takeaways are evident from election night:

- Republicans were able to mobilize enough new voters, largely in rural areas, to negate the historical DFL turnout advantage in presidential election years. This also raised the question of whether the DFL decision to largely forego traditional campaign tactics like door-knocking due to public health concerns had any negative impacts.
- Senses of frustration around the recent Line 3 decision by the Walz administration, concern over the “Defund the Police” narrative, and fatigue over the state’s COVID-19 response were seemingly voiced by many at the ballot box.
- Governor Tim Walz, up for re-election himself in 2022, must now carefully measure his approach to budget and policy proposals. While President-elect Joe Biden won the state by more than 7%, that performance did not equate to a “Blue Wave” across Minnesota that some predicted. Unpopular, but necessary, decisions lie ahead that will require compromise from all those involved.

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The smaller majorities and immediate focus on the state's budget deficit and continued pandemic response could result in a more collaborative approach by legislators, or it could lead to gridlock. Neither party will be able to unilaterally dictate terms on policy debates or spending and taxing decisions, while leaders must be even more aware of their respective political vulnerabilities and opportunities. To that point, all eyes are already looking ahead to the 2022 election when all state officials will be on the ballot.

See below for further analysis of election night impacts on the respective caucuses:

HOUSE DFL

House Democrats felt confident heading into this election cycle, flush with cash and running against a very controversial president at the top of the Republican ticket. Many observers were more focused on the Senate, speculating that was where the biggest changes could take place. However, in the end a strong GOP ground game and support for President Donald Trump in rural Minnesota led to a 5-seat loss and a slimmer DFL majority: 70-64.

Some of the DFL losses were not totally unexpected. In District 5A, Rep. John Persell (DFL – Bemidji) won his 2018 race by a mere 11 votes, in an area that continues to trend more and more conservative. Others were more of a surprise: Rep. Jeff Brand (DFL – St. Peter) looks to have been defeated (pending a recount) by a slim margin after garnering over 1,200 votes more than in his 2018 victory in a typically left-leaning district. Another example came in suburban Shakopee, a close swing district pickup by Republicans that was likely impacted by the third-party Legal Marijuana Now candidate claiming nearly 7.5% of the vote.

While not the election night results they wished for, the DFL will still set the agenda in the House for the next two years, albeit with some new faces. The results of last Tuesday's election, combined with a number of previously announced retirements and August primary challenges, means the caucus will have 11 new members and possibly as many as nine new committee chairs. Most notable in the midst of a statewide budget deficit is the caucus needing to find a new Ways and Means chair, following Rep. Lyndon Carlson's retirement after more than 30 years of service.

HOUSE GOP

House Republicans lost zero incumbents and picked up five seats in a year some thought they could end up losing ground. While they did not retake the majority, this shift does give Republicans more leverage in debates and negotiations, as Democrats can now only afford to lose two votes on any given bill. As the options for closing the budget deficit are likely to focus on a combination of cuts and taxes, it might be difficult for some members of the majority party to vote for the budget bills, particularly for those who won their re-election by a small margin. Representative Kurt Daudt (R – Crown) will continue on as Minority Leader, and has already stated he feels there is opportunity to pass legislation with the help of rural Democrats on issues such as mining and the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline replacement.

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Due to wins in open seats (where former Republicans retired) and the five pickups in seats held by Democrats, Republicans will have 11 new members join their caucus this year. Two of the members, Keith Franke and Matt Bliss, are former members who are returning after losing their seats in the “Blue Wave” of 2018.

An interesting side note is that four members of the Republican caucus split off last session and formed the “New Republican Caucus” and intend to operate as such again this session. However, the two factions typically take similar stances on issues.

SENATE GOP

The Senate GOP entered the election with a slim two-seat majority and exited the election with a razor-thin one-seat majority. This position is not new for Majority Leader Paul Gazelka (R – Nisswa), whose caucus also at one time held a one-seat majority in 2017-2018.

However, this time around the state is facing a budget deficit that totals in the billions of dollars. Senate Republicans can’t afford to lose a single vote, which will make assembling and passing the major budget bills a difficult task.

Coming into November, Republicans had a number of very competitive suburban seats along with two seats in the greater Rochester area to defend. Conventional wisdom and polling showed that President Trump was deeply unpopular with metro/suburban areas, which raised DFL hopes for flipping the Senate. Republicans were outspent 2-1, and in some cases as high as 4-1 in many of those targeted seats. Regardless, when the dust settled, down-ballot Republicans on the ticket outperformed Trump and were able to hold onto their seats—even in areas that Biden won convincingly. Contrary to a commonly repeated mantra, it turned out that all politics this year were not national.

The overall membership of the Senate Republican caucus is largely unchanged post-election. Only two current committee chairs will not return for the 2020 session. Higher Education Chair Paul Anderson (R – Plymouth) retired and Local Government Chair Dan Hall (R – Burnsville) lost his re-election bid. The caucus will be joined by three new members — Zach Duckworth (R – Lakeville), Gene Dornick (R – Austin) and Julia Coleman (R – Chanhassen) who replaces retiring Senator Scott Jensen (R – Chaska).

SENATE DFL

Going into the election with the goal of “flipping” the Senate, the DFL caucus, led by Sen. Susan Kent (DFL – Woodbury), hoped for a state-wide “Blue Wave” reaching from the metro to targeted seats in out-state Minnesota, including Rochester and Bemidji. Ultimately, that “Blue Wave” never materialized and produced a net gain of only one seat, chipping the GOP majority down from 35-32 to 34-33.

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This result was disappointing for DFLers. Despite the caucus and state party spending millions, one-party control of state government eluded them. Had they been successful, the DFL would have been positioned to pass progressive legislation on a number of issues ranging from the budget to clean energy to health care and paid family leave, not to mention influence over redistricting maps for future elections. The consolation prize is that with a 34-33 divide, Senate Republicans have no margin for error; on some issues, Majority Leader Gazelka will likely need to reach across the aisle for DFL votes.

The DFL caucus coming into the 2021-2022 session will remain under Sen. Kent's leadership. Membership of the caucus will look a bit different, with both Senator Matt Little (DFL – Lakeville) and Senator Dan Sparks (DFL – Austin) losing their re-election bids to GOP challengers. Many felt that Senator Little had been "renting" his seat since a surprising 2016 victory, but Sparks was a well-known 20-year incumbent. The results in that race spoke again to the improved ability of the GOP to turn out new voters in Greater Minnesota. New DFL caucus members will include Aric Putnam, who beat out Sen. Jerry Relph (R – St. Cloud), Ann Johnson Stewart, who flipped the open seat vacated by Sen. Paul Anderson (R – Plymouth), and Lindsey Port, who defeated incumbent Sen. Dan Hall (R – Burnsville).

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