LEGISLATURES

Unusual Economic Indicators

It's hard these days to discern whether the economy is in an upswing or a downfall. Here are some little-known economic indicators, pulled from various news, government and industry sources.

You know things are bad when:

Men's underwear sales tank.

When money is tight, so are underwear sales. Alan Greenspan watched this indicator back when he ran a consulting firm.

2 People sell their cemetery plots.

People dig up every dollar possible when desperate.

3 Mosquitoes menace many.

Lots of foreclosed homes = unkempt lawns and stagnant swimming pools = mosquito mating haven.

4 Football blacks out.

NFL ticket prices make sellouts unlikely in hard times. Games are broadcast locally only if the stadium is sold out.

Lipstick sales increase.

A little color is a cheap way to look and feel good.

Conversely, you know things are good when:

Bowling becomes fun.

The resurgence of upscale bowling alleys—with velvet ropes, dress codes and a generous selection of drinks—may indicate things are rolling along well.

2 Coffee sales resume.

Things are looking up when Starbucks once again becomes a necessity not a luxury.

3 Bright colored ties are popular.

Studies show both men and women tend to wear bright colors when they're feelin' groovy.

4 Skirt lengths hike up.

When consumer confidence is high, skirts are too.

5 Orders grow for cardboard boxes.

When businesses are selling more, boxes are needed to house the products and ship goods to consumers.

Revenue From Riesling

everal state legislatures have found ways to generate more revenue, not by raising taxes, but by raising their glasses—wine glasses that is. This year some states focused on changing their alcohol laws to boost sales and possibly attract more business. While 10 states raised taxes on alcohol in 2009 and 2010, only three did in 2011: Connecticut, Maryland and Oregon.

Tennessee and Washington passed laws allowing more places to hold liquor tastings, so consumers can sip products before buying. Washington's law establishes a pilot program that allows state liquor stores to hold tastings throughout the year. The state also now allows shops to sell refillable jugs of tapped beer to go, known as growlers.

Tennessee's bill was part of a package passed to attract a brewery to East Tennessee.

Among other things, the new law allows restaurants, bars and liquor stores to offer free samples of spirits, including high alcohol content beer. Tasting laws passed in California, Michigan, New Jersey and Virginia last year.

According to the Distilled Spirits Council, at least 34 states allow tastings in bars and restaurants, and 22 states allow them in retail stores that sell spirits for off-premise consumption. Even more allow tastings of wine and beer.

of who gets to sell alcohol. This

November, voters in Washington
passed an initiative to rivatize
liquor stores. As a result,
state package stores will

Some states are lengthening the list

close, and grocery and
warehouse stores
will be able to

sell liquor.

The change is expected to generate millions more

in state and local revenue.

A new Georgia law allows voters to decide whether to permit liquor stores in their communities to sell alcohol on Sundays.

Many jurisdictions in the
Atlanta area gave thumbs up
to Sunday sales in November.
Fifteen states have removed
or relaxed prohibitions on
Sunday sales of distilled
spirits in the past nine years.

—Jan Goehring

A Political Patchwork

oth political parties could find something to crow about in the results of the 2011elections.

Democrats celebrated winning three ballot measures they cared intensely about in Maine, Mississippi and Ohio, retaining the governorship in Kentucky, and convincingly maintaining control of the New Jersey General Assembly.

Republicans retained the governorships in Louisiana and Mississippi, won a vote in Ohio on a ballot measure designed to be a referendum on the president's health care plan, and achieved at least a tie, if not victory,

in the contests for control of the Mississippi House and the Virginia Senate.

Measures Yield Mixed Results

The Maine and Ohio ballot measures were popular referenda, petition-driven efforts by citizens to overturn laws recently passed by the legislatures.

In Maine, the law in question did away with the state's 38-year-old practice of allowing qualified citizens to register and vote on Election Day. Instead it required voters to be registered no later than the week before the election. It was championed by Republicans in the Legislature and opposed by Maine Democrats. Citizens voted for repeal by about a 60 percent margin. In Ohio, 61 percent of voters repealed a controversial new law passed by the legislature that weakened the bargaining rights of public employee unions.

In the biggest surprise of the night, Mississippi voters rejected a so-called "personhood" initiative by a 58 percent to 42 percent margin. Rejected by Colorado voters in 2008 and 2010, personhood amendments aim to define "person" as beginning at "the

moment of fertilization, cloning, or the functional equivalent thereof." The practical effects of this definition are unclear, and that ambiguity probably contributed to the downfall of Initiative 26 in Mississippi, which was widely expected to pass.

Ballot measure results weren't all one-sided though. While voters in Ohio rejected limits on the bargaining rights of public employee unions, they also endorsed a symbolic rejection of the individual mandate requirement in the federal health care reform law. they also endorsed a symbolic rejection of the individual mandate equirement in the federal health care reform law. Ohio is the fourth state to do so, and at least another four will consider similar questions next year.

Mississippi voters sent a mixed message, too. They rejected the personhood measure, but approved a strict voter ID amendment to the

state's constitution. Mississippi becomes the 31st state to require voters to show ID at the polls, and the eighth state to do so in 2011.

Competition for Legislative Seats

In the state legislative elections, with returns still coming in at press time, Republicans appeared to have picked up at least eight seats to take control of the Mississippi House, and they increased their margin in the Senate by two seats. With Republican Lieutenant Governor Phil Bryant winning the state's governorship, it means the Magnolia State

> will be under unified Republican control for the first time since the election of 1873.

In a series of expensive and hard-fought campaigns for the Virginia Senate, Republicans picked up two seats to tie the chamber 20-20. Lieutenant Governor Bill Bolling, a Republican, is likely to cast the tie-breaking votes that will allow the Republicans to organize the Senate and to win most close votes on policy issues. Republicans also netted six additional seats in the House of Delegates and assumed a commanding two-thirds super majority.

Democrats and Republicans fought to a draw in the New Jersey Senate, allowing Democrats to retain an eight-vote margin of control. Democrats picked up one seat in the Assembly and will have a 48-32 margin over the Republicans in the 2012-13 biennium.

In other noteworthy elections, a Democrat won a crucial special election in Iowa that would have tied the Senate if the Republican candidate had won. That left the Iowa Senate under Democratic control, 26-24. Two incumbent Republicans, Arizona Senate President Russell Pearce and Michigan Senator Paul Scott, were both recalled. Pearce,

who was best known for championing tough immigration measures, was replaced by a fellow Republican. Scott was targeted for recall mainly because of positions on education legislation. His seat will not be filled until a February special election.

Counting the Mississippi House as Republican but the Virginia Senate as tied, Republicans now control 19 of the 22 chambers in the 11 Confederate states of the "Old South." Nationally, Republicans control both chambers in 27 states, Democrats reign in 15, and seven are split between the two parties (Nebraska's Unicameral is nonpartisan). This is a high water mark for the Republicans not achieved since the pre-New Deal election of 1928.

—Karl Kurtz and Jennie Drage Bowser, NCSL