Voters said “stay the course” in legislative elections last fall and “yes” to most of the ballot measures. Now it’s time to get to work.

**Legislative Races Wrap-up**

In the Virginia Senate, a 40-member chamber that has changed hands three times in the last three years, Democrats needed to pick up just one seat to regain control. Retiring incumbents—four Republicans and two Democrats—created competitive open seats and exciting races, but in the end, the voters kept things unchanged. Republicans control the Senate in the Old Dominion State with the same 21-19 majority.

Meanwhile, over in the House of Delegates, every seat was up for a vote. Republicans held a 67-33 majority in the 100-member chamber prior to Election Day, and that didn’t change much. The GOP lost one seat but maintained a commanding 66-34 margin.

In Mississippi, Republicans increased their lead in the House of Representatives, but fell short of the 74 seats needed for a supermajority, which would have allowed them to pass spending, taxing and other measures that require a three-fifths vote without Democratic support. Two days after the election, however, Representative Jody Steverson, a Democrat, announced he was switching parties. Still, Republicans had a 73-48 majority with one race officially tied and set to be determined “by lot,” according to state law. In the end, the two candidates drew straws, with Democratic incumbent Bo Eaton coming out on top. Republican challenger Mark Tullos indicated he would contest the decision and has asked the Republican House to vote on the election this month. It’s a large turnaround from 2011, when Republicans captured the Mississippi House for the first time in 130 years. Republicans also maintained control of the Mississippi Senate by a 32-20 margin.

Louisiana held its “Cajun top-two primary” in October, with all candidates running on the same primary ballot regardless of party. Under this system, candidates with more than 50 percent of the votes win, but if no one receives more than 50 percent, the top two vote-getters meet in a runoff election.
Although all 39 state Senate seats and 105 House seats were up for election, more than half of the seats were uncontested, leaving only 70 seats for the primary—18 Senate and 52 House. When all was said and done, Republicans maintained their majority in both chambers (61-42-2 in the House, 25-14 in the Senate).

And in New Jersey, Democrats increased their majority in the Assembly by three, to control the chamber 51-29. The Garden State has multimember districts in which voters select two candidates to represent them in the Assembly. Democrats took one seat in a formerly split district and both seats in another district formerly held by Republicans.

**Governor Races**

Of the gubernatorial races, Louisiana’s was the one to watch. A tight contest between U.S. Senator David Vitter (R) and State Representative John Bel Edwards (D) went down to the wire in the Nov. 21 runoff, which had Edwards pulling out a surprising upset over Vitter. The GOP gained Kentucky when Republican Matt Bevin defeated Democrat Jack Conway to replace term-limited Steve Beshear. The Bluegrass State remains in the split column because Democrats hold the majority in the House. In Mississippi, incumbent Governor Phil Bryant (R) easily won re-election over Robert Gray (D).

That leaves the final count of governors at 31 Republicans, 18 Democrats and one independent, with another two Republicans, one Democrat and two independents in the territories and commonwealths—unchanged from before the election.

**Statewide Ballot Measures**

Voters in seven states decided on a total of 26 ballot questions last fall. This was a smaller number than usual, even for an odd-year election. But the slim crop covered a surprising range of issues, from education, marijuana and transportation to redistricting, taxes and more. The big trend was voters saying yes to virtually all of the measures, with one notable exception.

Voters in Washington overwhelmingly said yes to restricting trade in ivory and other animal products from a list that includes elephants, rhinos, tigers, lions, leopards, cheetahs, pangolins, marine turtles, sharks and rays. It is the first state to do so, though California, New Jersey and New York also ban trading in ivory products. Evergreen State voters also said yes to a restriction on the Legislature’s ability to raise taxes. It requires the state sales tax rate to decrease by a penny if the Legislature fails to send voters a constitutional amendment requiring any tax increase to get either a two-thirds vote in the Legislature or voter approval. The state does not have an income tax.

The electorate in Maine approved increased public funding for campaigns. Connecticut and Arizona have similar programs. Texans approved measures on highway funding, the right to hunt, fish and harvest wildlife, sports raffles and more. They also changed the constitution to no longer require state officials to live in the capital.

Coloradoans voted to allow the state to keep the marijuana taxes collected since recreational pot went on sale in 2014. Which brings us to Ohio, where 64 percent of the voters trounced a measure to legalize marijuana. But it’s unclear whether Ohioans were opposed to legalized marijuana, per se, or instead opposed to how the measure was designed. The plan specified 10 commercial operators, which led the Legislature to put a separate measure on the ballot to prohibit the citizen’s initiative process from being used for personal economic benefit. That anti-monopoly measure received a thumbs-up, with 52 percent of the vote.

Ohio voters also approved a bipartisan commission for legislative redistricting.

What’s the upshot of the 2015 contests? The status quo ruled the legislative and gubernatorial elections, while voters approved a variety of ballot measures and rejected ones that tried to use the system to benefit a few. It’s tough to tell what this may mean for this year’s pivotal elections, when voters will decide on more than 6,000 legislative seats and possibly 150 or more ballot measures. But until then, it’s time to get to work. Let the sessions begin!

**Where Legislatures Stand**

Following the elections in 2015, party control of state legislatures remained unchanged. Both chambers in 30 states have Republican majorities and in 11 states have Democratic majorities. In the remaining eight states, the two parties each hold one chamber. Nebraska is officially nonpartisan and has only one chamber.

- **Republican**
- **Democrat**
- **Split**
- **Popular Democratic Party (PDP)**
- **Nonpartisan and Unicameral**