For voters in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia, 2007 was a big election year with all legislative seats up for elections. These “odd-year” elections often garner little attention and generate little suspense. But this year was different. Majority control was up for grabs in all four states.

Democrats fared well by gaining majority status in two of the eight chambers and retaining majorities in five of the others. They now control the Mississippi and Virginia Senates by narrow margins.

There was, however, a silver lining for Republicans. In addition to keeping their solid advantage in the Virginia House, the GOP made big gains in the Louisiana House, falling just short of control. Democrats have held the chamber since 1876.

For well over a decade now, southern legislatures have been fertile ground for the GOP as they steadily added seats and chambers. Before the 1994 elections, Republicans did not control a single legislative body in the South. By 2007, they were in charge of over half. In November, Democrats reversed the trend by winning back the Mississippi and Virginia Senates.

THE OVERALL PICTURE

With those gains, Democrats now control the legislature in 23 states—up one from before the election. Republicans control both chambers in 14 states, and 12 states have divided legislatures. Nebraska has a unicameral legislature that is not elected on a partisan basis.

There were a handful of governor races in 2007. Republicans gained one and lost one. In Louisiana, the open governor’s race went to Republican Bobby Jindal while in Kentucky, incumbent Republican Governor Ernie Fletcher lost to Democratic challenger Steve Beshear. As it was before the elections, 28 governors are Democrats and 22 are Republicans.

DEMS HOLD ON IN LOUISIANA

With all seats up, Louisiana Democrats managed to maintain a slim majority in the House: 53 D, 50 R and two independents. And they kept the majority in the Senate: 24 D to 15 R—unchanged from before the election. Term limits took effect in Louisiana this year creating 45 open seats in the House and helping Republicans edge closer to outright numerical control. Of the 15 states with legislative term limits, Louisiana is the next-to-last where they have taken effect. Term limits kick in for Nevada legislators in 2010. At press time, a fierce contest for the speaker’s race in the House was taking shape between Democratic Representative Don Cazayoux and Republican Representative Jim Tucker. Both candidates were reaching out across party lines, so bipartisanship might be more prevalent when Louisiana convenes in 2008.

BY TIM STOREY

Tim Storey is NCSL’s elections and redistricting expert.

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MISSISSIPPI SENATE BACK TO DEMS

Winning back control of the Mississippi Senate was definitely a big victory for Democrats after losing control earlier in the year due to a Democratic senator switching to the GOP. Democrats now have a 28 to 24 edge. With incumbent Republican governor Haley Barbour cruising to re-election, winning the Senate was even more important for Democrats.

In the House, there was no change in the partisan numbers. Democrats still control 75 to 47. However, like their neighbor to the west, the Mississippi House had a pitched battle for speaker going at press time between Republican Representative Jeff Smith and incumbent House Speaker Billy McCoy. Both claim they have the votes.

REDISTRICTING LOOMS

Virginia legislative candidates raised more than $60 million for the 2007 races, according to the Associated Press. That big spending is a hint of what is to come in many states. Legislative races garner more attention and campaign cash as redistricting looms closer. Barring mid-term party switches, the majorities elected in six of the chambers last November will control 2010 redistricting. New Jersey and Virginia have House races in 2009.

Democrats now hold 3,988 of the legislative seats controlled by the two major parties, or 54.6 percent. That’s their highest mark since they got walloped in 1994 by Republicans. 2008 is a year of opportunity for both major parties with almost 6,000 legislative seats scheduled for elections and many close legislative chambers with majority control in play.

NOT MUCH CHANGE IN NEW JERSEY

Despite speculation of big change afoot before the election, afterwards the numbers looked very much the same. Republicans gained one seat, but Democrats still control both houses comfortably. In the Senate, it’s 23 D to 17 R. Assembly numbers are 48 D, 32 R. The big story in New Jersey was turnover. Over a third of Garden State legislators will be new in 2008—term limits-like turnover in a non-term limited state.

SLIM VICTORY FOR DEMOCRATS IN VIRGINIA

The Old Dominion was the biggest battleground in November and Democrats emerged with a slim two-seat majority in the Senate at 21 D-19 R. Three GOP incumbent senators were defeated: Jeannemarie Devolites-Davis, J.K. “Jay” O’Brien Jr. and Nick Rerras. In the House, Democrats gained ground, but Republicans kept their majority 54 to 44 with two independents. The last time Democrats controlled either chamber in Virginia was before the 1999 election.

FEW SURPRISES IN 2007 BALLOT MEASURES

Voters in six states in November considered 34 statewide questions—a fairly typical total for an odd-year election.

MAINE

Failed: A proposal to extend legislative term limits from 8 to 12 years.

Failed: A citizen initiative for a new tribal commercial harness racing track.

NEW JERSEY

Failed: Public Question 1 that would have dedicated the second half of last year’s 1 percent sales tax hike to property tax relief. Homeowners could have saved up to 20 percent.

Failed: A $450 million bond measure for state-funded stem cell research.

OREGON

Passed: A proposal to rollback controversial Measure 37 from 2004 that removed most land use regulation in the state and prompted measures on regulatory takings in Arizona, California, Idaho and Washington in 2006. (Only Arizona’s passed.)

Failed: An 84.5-cents-a-pack tobacco tax hike for health care.

TEXAS

Passed: A proposal to deny bail in felony and family violence cases.

Passed: A measure to require that certain votes of the Legislature be recorded and publicized on the Internet.

Passed: A $3 billion bond issue for cancer research.

Passed: $6 billion in bonds for highway and construction projects.

UTAH

Failed: A school voucher bill passed by the Legislature last February to provide scholarships between $500 and $3,000, depending on family size and income, for private school tuition.

WASHINGTON

Passed: A citizen initiative that requires a two-thirds vote for new or increased fees being considered by the Legislature. It takes away state agencies’ authority to impose or increase fees and requires a detailed fiscal analysis, including a 10-year projection of costs to taxpayers. And, from now on, the people have to vote on any tax actions not already subject to a referendum.

Passed: A popular referenda that prohibits insurers from unreasonably denying a claim for coverage or benefits and allows claimants to sue for up to three times the amount of damages.

Passed: A legislative referenda to create a rainy day fund. One percent of general state revenue will be transferred to the account each fiscal year. Use of the funds will be limited to protecting life and safety in times of emergencies or job declines unless the account exceeds 10 percent of general state revenues. In that case, the Legislature can use the money with a three-fifths vote, or by majority vote, for education construction projects.

—Jennie Drage Bowser, NCSL