

GOP soars in House, state races; Democrats expected to keep Senate

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Washington (CNN) -- Voters' anger over a stubborn jobless rate and anxiety over troubled economy helped propel Republicans to a sweeping takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives and a stronger presence in state offices, projections indicate.

With results still coming in, the full extent of the Republican takeover of the 435-member House was still to be determined. But CNN projected that Republicans would win at least 60 more House seats than they currently hold to wipe out the Democratic majority of the past four years.

Democrats cling onto their majority in the Senate, though in smaller numbers, according to projections based on CNN analysis of exit poll data from Tuesday's midterm elections. Democrats were guaranteed of holding at least 50 of the 100 Senate seats, with a handful of close races still outstanding, according to the projections.

Exit poll data analyzed by CNN showed the economy was the dominant issue on voters' minds and indicated that key constituencies shifted from supporting Democrats in 2008 to voting for Republicans this time.

While the ushering in of more Republicans into office might signal a rejection of Democrats in power, it might not be a warm embrace of the GOP.

Exit polling showed voter dissatisfaction with both parties, as each received a 53 percent unfavorable rating.

An energized conservative electorate, fueled by the anti-establishment Tea Party movement that emerged in 2009, helped Republicans to what could be the biggest house gain by any major party since 1948.

"With their voices, the American people are demanding a new way forward in Washington," said House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio, who is expected to become House speaker when the new GOP majority takes over in January. But he added, "This is not a time for celebration ... not when one in 10 of our fellow citizens are out of work ...not when we have buried our children under a mountain of debt."

Current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi released a statement on the midterm elections.

"Over the last four years, the Democratic majority in the House took courageous action on behalf of America's middle class to create jobs and save the country from the worst economic catastrophe since the Great Depression," the statement read.

"The outcome of the election does not diminish the work we have done for the American people. We must all strive to find common ground to support the middle class, create jobs, reduce the deficit and move our nation forward."

President Barack Obama called Boehner to congratulate him as the GOP takeover of the House appeared certain. They had a brief but pleasant conversation, according to Boehner's aides. The two discussed working together to focus on the top priorities of the American people, which Boehner has identified as creating jobs and cutting spending.

The rise of the Tea Party movement added a new element to the election cycle, roiling Republican races by boosting little-known and inexperienced candidates to victory over mainstream figures in GOP primaries across the country. The movement that emerged in 2009 in opposition to expanded government and the growing federal deficit and could pose a threat in the 2012 election.

"I don't think there's any question that if it were not for the Tea Party, the Republican margin in the House of Representatives would not be as high as it's going to be," CNN senior political analyst David Gergen said Tuesday night. "They gave a lot of enthusiasm and fuel to the Republican Party."

Tea Party-backed Republicans Rand Paul in Kentucky and Marco Rubio in Florida won their Senate races, according to the projections.

Adding to the Democrats' losses, Obama's former Senate seat in Illinois went to Republican Mark Kirk, who defeated Democrat Alexi Giannoulias.

"Tonight the sun set on a one-party, corrupt state," Kirk told supporters Tuesday night. "And this Senate seat was just returned to its rightful owners, the people of Illinois."

But projections show Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, will retain his seat by defeating Republican Sharron Angle, a Tea Party favorite who beat 11 other opponents in a June primary to clinch the GOP nomination.

A cheering crowd of supporters chanted Reid's name and "si se puede" -- Spanish for "yes we can" -- Tuesday night. The former boxer thanked them for their help securing his re-election.

"I've been in some pretty tough fights in my day ... But I have to admit, this has been one of the toughest," he said.

Democrat Chris Coons was the projected winner over Republican Christine O'Donnell, another Tea Party-supported candidate, in Delaware's Senate race for the seat formerly held by Vice President Joe Biden.

The final make-up of the Senate will include no African-Americans. The only current African-American senator, Roland Burris of Illinois, is retiring, and none of the three African-American candidates won on Tuesday.

Both Paul, the son of Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, and O'Donnell rode Tea Party support to defeat mainstream Republican candidates in the primaries.

Republican candidates were also strong in governors' races, with at least 10 gubernatorial seats switching from Democrats to Republicans, CNN projected.

Republicans needed a net gain of only three governorships Tuesday for a majority nationally. Often overshadowed during midterm campaigns, governorships can impact national politics by their influence in the redistricting of state electorates.

Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, who gained national attention for her support of Arizona's controversial new immigration law, defeated Democrat Terry Goddard to retain office.

In South Carolina, Nikki Haley became the state's first female governor by defeating Democratic opponent Vincent Sheheen in a tightly contested race.

CNN projected Democrat Jerry Brown will defeat Republican Meg Whitman in California for the governorship now held by Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is stepping down under term limits. And a widely publicized battle in New York will end with Democratic Attorney General Andrew Cuomo sliding past Republican favorite Carl Paladino, according to CNN analysis of exit poll data.

Conservative candidates also made strong gains in state legislatures. The Republican State Leadership Committee estimated that at least 16 state legislative chambers had moved from Democratic to Republican control in Tuesday's voting.

Those changes have the potential to reverberate far beyond the state level: By seizing control of legislative chambers in several key states, the GOP significantly strengthened its hand heading into what promises to be contentious congressional redistricting process, where legislatures decide how congressional districts are drawn. That can mean the difference between an incumbent having an easy path to re-election -- or seeing his or her district drawn out of existence altogether.

The GOP also significantly increased its pool of viable future U.S. House and Senate candidates.

The long and bitter campaign season drew more than \$3.5 billion in spending, making it the most expensive nonpresidential vote ever, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, a watchdog group.

About 75 percent of Americans say things are going badly in the country, according to a CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll released Monday.

The economy was rated the most important issue by 62 percent of voters, far eclipsing health care reform (19 percent), immigration (8 percent) and the war in Afghanistan (7 percent), according to the exit polling.

Most voters, 88 percent, rated economic conditions as not good or poor, and 86 percent said they were very worried or somewhat worried about the economy, the exit polling showed.

Unemployment, at a rate of 9.6 percent amid a slow recovery from economic recession, has been a dominant issue, with Republicans accusing Obama and the Democrats of pushing through expensive policies that have expanded government without solving the problem.

Obama has led Democrats in defending his record, saying that steps such as the economic stimulus bill and auto industry bailout were necessary to prevent a depression, while health care reform and Wall Street reform will lay the foundation for sustainable future growth.

Observers warned that the expected Republican gains offer little chance of compromise or bipartisan approaches on major issues.

In the Senate, legislative gridlock is likely as Republicans strengthen their current minority of 41 seats. The Democrats' simple majority in Senate doesn't give them power to block filibusters.

Democrats are also wary of a recent comment by Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who told the National Journal, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." The first test of a new relationship will come in mid-November, when Congress convenes a post-election lame-duck session to try to clear unfinished legislation before the newly elected Congress gathers in January. Among other issues, lawmakers must decide whether and how to extend Bush-era tax cuts.