

New day dawning for Dems

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The political "perfect storm" sought by local Democrats shattered the Republican fortress that was Harris County on Tuesday, but left some GOP officeholders standing strong and many local voters emotionally drained.

With Barack Obama leading the way at the top of the local ballot, the most populous county in Texas elected a new sheriff, Democratic City Councilman Adrian Garcia. The election also wiped about 20 Republican state district judges out of the civil and criminal court houses.

But on a night of mixed verdicts, in which Tuesday's turnout fell far short of the early vote avalanche, Republican Pat Lykos was barely ahead in the race for district attorney, with about 7,500 mail-in ballots to be counted.

Republican Ed Emmett, the county government chief, withstood the Democratic onslaught and Republican Paul Bettencourt, the tax assessor-collector, joined him as a survivor, according to the nearly complete totals.

In two congressional districts designed to elect Republicans, Democrats were unable to protect Rep. Nick Lampson, D-Stafford, or eject Reps. John Culberson, R-Houston, and Michael McCaul, R-Austin.

But Obama's slim advantage in Harris County — the first time in 44 years that the Democrat at the top of the ticket got a majority here — appeared to carry part of his party's slate with him.

Toward their goal of grabbing a majority in the state House, Democrats boosted challenger Kristi Thibaut to victory over Republican state Rep. Jim Murphy in a southwest Houston district. It appeared, though, the GOP would keep a bare majority in the Texas House, 76-74.

And the county voters' support for most Democratic judicial candidates was a reversal of the almost total dominance that Republicans exercised over the judicial system since 1994.

Democrats pierced the GOP mantle thanks to a giant combined turnout that started with early voting that included more than 730,000 voters.

Election Day turnout fell well short of predictions, with fewer than 500,000 people participating. Still, the total turnout of about 1.16 million of the county's 1.96 registered voters set a record for the county.

The early voting was more kind to Democrats. Obama and other Democratic candidates were staked to leads of 7 percentage points among those voters. The smaller Election Day crowd brought Republicans up to where Lykos edged past Democrat C.O. Bradford.

There were tears and cheers on both sides as voters and candidates gathered to witness what in many cases was a cliffhanger.

Penny George stood in front of a jumbo screen and wept as she saw John McCain concede to Obama. Her son, 22-year-old U.S. Marine Phillip George, was killed in Afghanistan in August 2005 and she was a passionate McCain backer.

"We don't want to see the war end before the job is done. If they pull the troops out quickly, the terrorists will follow them back over here and there will be more 9/11s," she said.

Friend Deanna Luprete tried to cheer her up.

"Four years is just that quick," she said. "And who knows? Sarah Palin might be our next president."

At local Obama headquarters, 28-year-old Chonta Flowers, said the victory produced "a new America."

"It's a big milestone. The country is about to change. Unity is on the way."

The unprecedented turnout was foretold in some ways by the record-breaking county presidential primaries in March that allowed Democrats to track more than 400,000 supporters of Obama or Hillary Rodham Clinton.

But for Republicans, whose local party was headed by George H.W. Bush more than 40 years ago, political risk grew in the last decade or so with the gradual change in the county's population. Harris County's Hispanic population has roared ahead, bringing young and/or first-time voters into the fray in a year in which polls showed Latinos favoring Democratic causes by more than a 2-to-1 ratio nationwide.

When Democrats daydreamed about overrunning Harris County, the fantasy must have included a high-profile minority candidate like Obama, local Republican officeholders getting into trouble, a faltering economy, the absence of a Bush on the ballot and instead a GOP contender who was never a favorite of the county's conservatives on issues such as immigration.

They also salivated at the idea of wealthy lawyers and liberal entrepreneurs sending huge checks to bolster their side in Harris County immediately after Dallas County broke the Republican lock on countywide offices there in 2006.

In large part, those dreams came true.

"We've known for some time that the majority of folks in Harris County shared Democratic values ... and we were finally able to get voters to come and express that at the ballot box," local Democratic Party Chairman Gerald Birnberg said.

"I think when the citizens see how well Democrats can govern and lead, the next time out we will go all the way," he added.

Republican chairman Jared Woodfill said a new, divided government may work well.

"This could be an opportunity for Republicans and Democrats to work together in county government, and that is what they are going to have to do," he said.

University of Houston political scientist Richard Murray said Tuesday's outcome will lead locally to "a top to bottom contested election in 2010."

There are usually fewer voters in nonpresidential elections, so "it will be a very different electorate," he said, "but one of the things about bringing in new voters, which this election is clearly doing, is that they are a lot easier to find next time."

About 64 percent of the county's voters used the straight ticket option — the same rate as in 2004. Those who voted Democratic made up about 34 percent of all voters; about 28 percent went for Republicans and the rest Libertarians.

Murray said that with both parties showing they can win elections here, "it's good for political consultants. Every race (will) still be contested. Every job in this county, for the next couple of cycles somebody's going to file for it. The days of being unopposed are over."

Reporters Lindsay Wise and Dane Schiller contributed.

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