

Democrats make gains in gubernatorial, congressional races

WASHINGTON - The U.S. electorate appears to have focused more on the struggling economy than social issues as they selected governors and members of Congress, with Democrats making gains throughout the country.

Democrats won seven of the 11 gubernatorial elections Nov. 4 and could take as many as 25 new House seats and at least five additional Senate seats, gaining significant majorities in Congress. By midday Nov. 5 the results of several races were not final.

"It appears the majority of the voters who supported (President-elect Barack) Obama supported Democratic candidates," said Stephen Krason, 54, a political science professor at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio. He also is president of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

"Economics is a normal thing for the electorate to focus on, but with what has been going on in the last two months it's not surprising that the economy began to dwarf other things in the last several weeks," he said Nov. 5 in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

Political campaigns nationwide began to focus on the economy after Sept. 15, when dramatic fluctuations overwhelmed the New York Stock Exchange, some giant financial services firms declared bankruptcy and credit markets began to freeze up.

It's also typical for the electorate to turn on the political party in charge of the country during an economic crisis, and since President George W. Bush is a Republican, that explains why Democrats made such gains in the national and state elections, Krason said.

Issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage were not raised in most political races this election cycle and polls showed the electorate gave those matters much less weight when casting their ballots, he said.

"You are seeing an ingraining of an anti-traditional movement in the country," Krason said. "It seems as though the electorate is accepting the cultural developments on abortion and sexual questions and that is why you are not seeing those issues stressed by the candidates. The politics reflects the culture."

Though Democrats have traditionally favored funding social programs for the needy, it's too early to tell if charitable organizations will benefit from the greater numbers of Democratic officeholders, said Candy S. Hill, senior vice president for social policy and government affairs at Catholic Charities USA.

"We have a terrible situation with our economy, and no matter what party is in power, that is going to be the focus right now, especially in the first 100 days of the Obama administration," Hill said. "Our message will not change. We're dedicated to working on both sides of the aisle. We will welcome new faces to Washington and in the states, and to establishing partnerships with those who serve."