

Democrats retain control in Maryland

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Mary Ellen Russell wasn't surprised Marylanders bucked national trends in the Nov. 2 election. While voters in many other states entrusted their legislatures to the GOP, Marylanders returned a Democratic majority to the General Assembly.

"It certainly reflects the very strong influence of the Democratic Party in our state," said Russell, who represents the state's Catholic bishops in Annapolis as executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

"It does show a certain confidence among the voters about the leadership of our state - particularly in terms of the economy," she said. "I think the Republican Party in Maryland will be looking to focus their efforts on greater unity and clearer messages."

Democrats picked up two seats in the State Senate and lost six seats in the House of Delegates, according to unofficial results. Democratic Gov. Martin J. O'Malley won another four years, defeating Republican Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

The House of Delegates is projected to have 98 Democrats and 43 Republicans, while the Senate is projected to have 35 Democrats and just 12 Republicans.

As she prepares to work with the new Legislature and a familiar chief executive, Russell is hopeful long-sought measures benefitting nonpublic schools will pass and that newly elected lawmakers will protect the social-safety net for the poor and vulnerable when the Legislature convenes in January.

Russell anticipates some real struggles, however, in promoting pro-life measures. Defending traditional marriage will also be difficult, she said, as lawmakers are expected to introduce a measure legalizing same-sex marriage.

"I would hope that the Democratic Party in Maryland thinks long and hard about leaving room in that party for members who support respect-for-life issues," Russell said. "For all of us who care about that issue, it will be extremely important that we speak up to our friends in the Democratic Party and encourage them to consider the importance of that voice."

Russell expects the "overriding" concern in the next legislative session will be addressing budget deficits. She believes there is support for looking after the needs of low-income families. Similarly, she sees support for immigrants in both legislative chambers.

"We are hopeful we can continue to ward off legislation that unfairly targets the immigrant community," she said.

The future of "BOAST," a business tax credit benefiting students and teachers in public and nonpublic schools, may hinge on the makeup of the House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee. While the Senate has passed the proposed tax credit in the past, the House committee killed it.

"We still see significant support for BOAST in both chambers," Russell said. "We are optimistic about the possibility that there will be a more receptive membership on the Ways and Means Committee. That remains to be seen."

Maryland picked up one Republican seat at the federal level when Andy Harris unseated Democratic U.S. Representative Frank Kratovil in the First Congressional District. Harris is expected to play a role in a push in the GOP-controlled House of Representatives to enact the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act. The measure would ensure conscience protections and a ban on abortion funding in health care reform and other laws.

"We want universal health care that is universally affirming of life," said Richard Doerflinger, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

Doerflinger was one of three panelists representing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during a Nov. 5 presentation at the Eastern regional convention of the Catholic Press Association in Baltimore.

Citing NARAL Pro-Choice America, Doerflinger noted that the pro-life agenda picked up 44 votes in the House and six in the Senate.

The number of pro-life Democrats in the Senate increased from two to three with the election of former Gov. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, he said.

John Carr, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, said the poor and vulnerable did not seem to be high on anyone's agenda in the 2010 election.

"The poor were missing in action in this campaign," he said. "Poverty is increasing in the richest nation in the world and not a word was said."

As federal lawmakers examine tax policy, Carr said Catholic lobbyists will be focused on how that policy affects those earning less than \$30,000 a year.

Maria Odom, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, said U.S. bishops will remain strong advocates of comprehensive immigration reform and just policies for immigrants.

"They want them to be able to live out of the shadows in safety and dignity," Odom said.

The lobbyists agreed that the Catholic Church's positions on the issues do not neatly align with either political party.

"Our focus is the least of these," Carr said, "and that is not the focus of Washington no matter who is in charge."