



By Colleen O'Dea , November 10 in More Issues

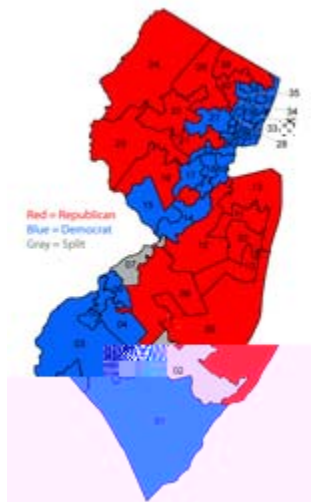
In the game of Monday morning quarterbacking on the Wednesday after the election, New Jersey's politically savvy of all stripes were pointing fingers, taking credit, and placing blame.

The map favored the Democrats.

Gov. Chris Christie didn't do enough to help his party.

The Democrats (or Republicans) spent a ridiculous amount of money that did (or didn't) buy them seats.

If only more people had voted.



What the off-year legislative election results -- the Democrats gained one seat in the Assembly -- really boil down to is the independence of New Jersey's electorate and the truly local nature of these races.

"These are fairly personal, local races," said Daniel J. Douglas, director of

"There don't appear to be any coattails in the state," said Douglas.

He included Christie in that statement, noting the governor's approval ratings were around 60 percent and yet his ads or appearances did not help Vince Polistina in the 2nd, Jim Keenan and Christopher Hargas in the 7th or other Republicans anywhere else.

Derek Roseman, a spokesman for the New Jersey Democratic State Committee, said that just two years ago, Christie won half the districts in the state and almost prevailed in several others.

Not only are there two districts where they split the ticket, but there are five others where they don't seem to vote with their party at all.

In four districts, the 11th, 12th, 13th and 16th, the number of registered Democrats outnumber Republicans but the GOP continues to hold the seats. Meanwhile, in the 1st District, the opposite is true, with Democrats in power despite a Republican registration advantage.

The key not only to these, but to many other districts, are the ranks of the state's unaffiliated voters. Numbering more than 2.4 million, the unaffiliateds make up more than 46 percent of all registered voters.

That's one reason why both parties take their last-minute get-out-the-vote efforts seriously.

This year's GOTV seemed to favor the Democrats -- perhaps, in part, because Election Day was warm and sunny, weather that encourages a walk to the polls in more urbanized, typically blue-leaning areas.

Pre-election polls showed a virtual dead heat in both the 2nd and 38th Districts. Whelan and Sen. Robert Gordon (D-38) both won by larger-than-expected margins after their campaigns did a better job of pulling out their vote.

"Money matters, but nothing beats boots on the ground," said Charles Wowkanech, President of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO, adding the labor movement had 11,000 volunteers knocking on 140,000 doors on Tuesday.

"In a race in which you know there's going to be a small turnout, it's the ground game that matters -- it's the culmination of weeks of work making phone calls, knocking on doors, and turning out your vote."

Gordon said "we couldn't have won" without the small army of police, firefighters, teachers, building trades workers and environmental activists that made up his field operation. The strong effort not only helped Gordon and his Assembly running mates, but also enabled Democrats to elect two Bergen freeholders, the county clerk, the county surrogate and numerous mayors and council members, ending a two-year Republican tide in the county, said Senator Paul Sarlo (D-36).

Large-scale GOTV operations were also critical in helping the Democrats hold both Assembly seats in the 7th, as well as the larger-than-expected victory margins of Sen. Linda Greenstein and her running mates in the 14th District in Mercer and Middlesex counties, said state Democratic chairman and Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-19).

Labor's role was a question mark after Democratic leaders convinced enough members from South Jersey and Essex County to join with Christie's Republicans to pass a bill that not only increased pension and health benefit contributions for public employees, but also stripped them of the right to bargain over healthcare issues for four years.

While some unions vowed retribution last summer, "the public and private sector unions really came together in the final weeks because they understood the need to maintain a Democratic majority in order to prevent Gov. Christie from enacting an anti-union v.00014.8(ublican -5.1(-5.5(stood)-5.2(g).7( C)-5(.rt)1.7(hv

A strong GOTV effort also was important because the political landscape has essentially leveled the fundraising picture.

This year's election marked the first state races since 1997 in which Democrats did not enjoy a major funding advantage because of massive contributions to county organizations and key races from multi-millionaire Jon Corzine, who began bankrolling the party in 1999 in anticipation of his run for the U.S. Senate the following year.

When the final campaign spending statistics are released later this month, they should show that Corzine's absence, and Christie's fund-raising prowess both nationally and within the state, put the GOP on an even playing field with Democrats.

Another reason GOTV is so important is because so few people actually get out and vote.

With statistics from all but two counties in, Tuesday's turnout ranged from a low of 18.4 percent in Essex County to a high of 37.8 percent in Cape May County. On average, a little more than a quarter of voters cast ballot.

Legislators' duties get lost in the minds of voters. Unless there is a pressing local issue, people tend to ignore political races below the level of governor or U.S. Senate. Douglas said the authors of New Jersey's current constitution consciously decided to hold legislative elections in off years so that they would not get caught up in battles over federal issues. Low turnout is the consequence.

Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, said the state could take steps to try to boost turnout. For instance, declare a holiday every election day to encourage people to go to the polls. The most radical idea: Adopt Australia's system of mandatory voting, with a small penalty assessed on those who don't.

"Absolutely, there are ways to do it," Dworkin said.

Larger numbers of voters of all political persuasions could give challengers a greater chance. Today, independent candidates like Rose Ann Salanitri have little hope of beating better-known and better-financed candidates with a major party backing them.

The incumbents in the safely Republican 24th raised more than \$300,000 as of late October, according to reports filed with the New Jersey

