

State Legislature Preview: With Near Parity in the House, Look for Contentious Session

Republicans will hold a razor thin 68-66 advantage in the Minnesota House of Representatives going into the 2005 legislative session this January, creating conditions that could make it one of the most contentious sessions in recent years.

Although slim, the majority means Republicans will retain the power to name committee chairs. It also means a single renegade Representative could neutralize its advantage on any given issue. Mix into the equation nine open House committee chairs as a result of the election and retirements, and the "opportunities for compromise" multiply.

While some may call this fall's elections a dramatic and decisive victory for Minnesota Democrats, we at Ewald submit that it was more of a correction than a Democratic mandate. Like the rest of the country, Minnesota is fairly evenly divided between the two major parties.

To better understand this year's election we need to revisit the 2002 election and the dramatic events leading up to the vote. Just days before the election, Senator Paul Wellstone was killed in a horrific plane crash. At the Wellstone memorial service, many felt Democratic politicking stained what should have been a respectful nonpartisan event. Voter backlash led to a surge in numbers for House Republicans from 71 members to 83 in that election.

A Republican majority of that size in all likelihood was unsustainable. Thus, a correction was due and many political pundits, including the authors of this preview, predicted loss of 5-8 seats for the Republicans in the House this year.

What Fueled Democratic Gains?

What happened to give Democrats twice the number of seats most experts predicted? Several factors were in play that shifted 13 seats from the Republican side of the aisle to the Democrats' side. The largest single factor likely was voter anger with incumbents for accomplishing little last session.

This was particularly apparent in the Twin Cities suburbs and the Rochester area, we believe, where the lack of action on transportation issues and a capital bonding bill (the bill for state construction projects) created a lot of ammunition for Democrats to use against Republican incumbents. We believe voters sent a clear message to legislators to get the work done or they will find someone who will.

Democrats also benefited from a record turnout of 77 percent of the state's eligible voters. The work of many outside groups with Democratic leanings, such as Move On.org and ACT, played a key role in some races across the state. These groups put foot soldiers on the ground getting out the vote for Democrats in a number of key races.

Another factor working in Democrats' favor was voters feeling the effects of the dramatic budget cuts enacted over the past two years. Taxpayers have seen dramatic jumps in their property taxes along with higher fees for almost anything dealing with state government. The combination of all these factors helped swing the pendulum back toward the center this fall, benefiting Democratic candidates.

Senate Outlook

The Senate was not up for election this year. Democrats maintain a slim majority with 35 members compared to 31 Republicans and 1 Independent. The new mix in the House should lead to an interesting dynamic for the upcoming session. Look for Senator Dean Johnson and House minority leader, Matt Entenza, to work closely on issues this session. The Speaker and Senator Johnson did not work well together last session, failing to reach an agreement on anything.

The Senate DFL may be emboldened by the results of this election. We look for them to pass many bills early in the session in order to put pressure on the House and make them look like obstructionists. Remember, in order for a bill to become law it must pass both houses of the legislature and be signed by the Governor.

Ramifications for 2005

The legislature will be a dramatically different place in 2005. As noted, the House lost nine committee chairs from last year. It will take a while for new leaders to emerge; and how they emerge will impact legislation. The projected budget deficit again will be the dominant issue facing legislators and will have a major impact on bills in virtually all committees.

Near-party parity in the House will force more bipartisan cooperation on all bills as they work themselves through the process. Work at the

State Capitol could come to a grinding halt if there is a lack of cooperation across the political aisle. Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty also will need to work more closely with Democrats than he ever has in the past. With such a large majority in the House the last two years he was able to largely ignore the Democrats and still get what he wanted. That will not be the case in 2005.

It is our belief that Gov. Pawlenty will make liberal use of his veto power, borrowing a strategy very similar to the one used by former Governor Arne Carlson, also a Republican, during his two terms in office. Pawlenty then may be faced with brokering deals in the House on legislation that can be "selectively overridden."

A by-product of the closeness in party numbers is the power it will give to moderates in both parties. Party leadership will not be able to ignore them, which sometimes has happened recently. Moderates will be able to slow the process and exact a price for their cooperation. It is our belief this will mean that you will not see any dramatic movement on many of the socially sensitive issues that have so dominated the legislature in the last couple of years.

The Major Outcome of Election 2004 will be a Contentious Session in 2005

- We look for some specialized taxes to increase on items like gas, cigarettes and alcohol.
- Look for some action to be taken in the area of transportation funding.
- We believe there will be continued restraint on the spending side.
- We see no new dramatic spending programs or large increases in existing programs.
- We believe it will be a session to hold onto what we have and not lose ground as part of a state budget deficit solution.
- You can count on legislators working very hard to finish on time so they can go home and tell the voters they got their work done.