Anti-Democratic wave strongest on coast

Eastern Broward, Palm Beach counties feel greatest effects

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

6:36 PM EDT, November 3, 2010

LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA

Democrats thought they'd discovered an unpolished jewel — moderate voters in Broward and Palm Beach counties — that they dreamed of turning into election gold.

But Tuesday's Republican wave shattered that theory as voters dashed Democratic hopes of gains and delivered high-profile setbacks all along the coast.

"The tide was for the Republicans," said Ken Evans, northeast Broward leader for the county's Democratic Party. "This is payback to the Democrats. I just think it's an overall thing that the Republican Party and the independents were sending the message that they were fed up and wanted change."


In Palm Beach and Broward counties, Republicans swept several open state legislative seats where no incumbent was running. And farther down the ballot, Republican Chip LaMarca unseated Broward County Commissioner Ken Keechl, who won his job in the 2006 Democratic wave.

Voter discontent with Democrats could be seen in districts west of Interstate 95, but Republicans didn't enjoy the kind of victories they won in the east.

Republicans were energized and motivated to get to the polls. Democrats were discouraged and less interested in voting than in 2006 and 2008, analysts said.

And, independent/no party voters, who went with the Democrats when they were mad at President George W. Bush in 2006 and 2008, moved dramatically from Democrats to Republicans now that they're mad at President Barack Obama.

"That's classic swing territory. And in swing territory you get hurt," said Kevin Hill, a political scientist at Florida International University. "It's a bad year to be a Democrat running in that territory."
Hill said the shift between 2008, when Klein had 55 percent to West's 45 percent, and 2010, when West won 54 percent to Klein's 46 percent, is "an incredible swing."

When Democrats began contemplating the 2010 elections in the heady months after Obama's inauguration, party strategists and office-seekers hoped they could make gains along the coast. They looked at Klein's 2006 victory over Shaw, Keechl's Broward victory the same year, Obama's winning the same territory in 2008, and strong performances by recent statewide candidates.

"I believed it. I looked at the numbers," said state Rep. Kelly Skidmore, D-Boca Raton. Rather than seek re-election, Skidmore ran for an open, two-county seat in the Florida Senate — and was crushed by state Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale.

What that theory didn't cover was growing disenchantment with Democrats.

Evans, the Broward Democratic leader, and Jack Furnari of Boca Raton, a conservative activist and vice president of the Boca Raton Republican Club, offered the same analysis: With the nation in economic crisis, the Democrats in Washington didn't focus on jobs and the economy. Instead, they delivered the new health care law.

"They wanted jobs, and they didn't want health care," Evans said of the electorate.

Without the health care legislation, Furnari said, "it would have been a much tougher battle. And I don't know if we would have taken as much as we did. I think health care destroyed them."

Furnari said there's a reason so many ads showed Democratic candidates' faces next to pictures of Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "Any connection to those high deficits and that health care bill — any connection, no matter how tenuous — was toxic."

West of Interstate 95, there are more registered Democrats and fewer independent voters, who Hill said are more inclined to swing to a different party from one election to the next. Democrats generally fared well.

A notable exception was Wellington Councilwoman Lizbeth Benacquisto's defeat of Democratic state Rep. Kevin Rader for an open state Senate seat that extends from Palm Beach County to the West Coast of Florida. It had been held by state Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres, who resigned to run for state attorney general.

And, said former Broward Republican Chairman Ed Pozzuoli, even U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, didn't fare as well as usual. She won more than 60 percent of the vote, down from her usual 70 percent plus.

When all of Broward and Palm Beach counties are taken together, South Florida is still strongly Democratic. Governor candidate Alex Sink did win both counties by double digits.
"South Florida stands out compared to the rest of the state," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University.

But the coastal territory is different. Hill said residents are relatively wealthy and highly educated, a demographic that went strongly for Obama.

On Tuesday they went Republican. On Tuesday, U.S. Sen.-elect Marco Rubio, R-Fla., won 47 percent of the vote in coastal Broward precincts and just 32 percent countywide. Similar numbers for Palm Beach County were not available Wednesday.

Still, the results don't necessarily foreshadow what will happen in 2012, Wagner said.

"It's a little dangerous to draw too many conclusions from this election, in the same way that I think people drew too many conclusions from the Obama election," he said. "The truth is sometimes a little more complicated. And sometimes it's simpler."

Database editor John Maines contributed to this report.

Anthony Man can be reached at aman@SunSentinel.com or 954-356-4550. Republican and Democratic leaders analyze the election results on the Broward Politics blog at SunSentinel.com/BrowardPolitics.