

Evanston Democrats savor a huge win

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Longtime Democratic Party of Evanston member Joanne Zolomij remembers the last time Illinois had a governor from her party.

"I was young and had two little kids," she said.

Today they are 31 and 29, she said.

"So it's been a long time," she said.

She and other DPOE members jammed into the party's election headquarters at Prairie Moon restaurant in downtown Evanston Tuesday night. Watching election returns on an overhead television set, they savored the news that Rod Blagojevich was winning the gubernatorial race over the Republican candidate, Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan.

Blagojevich is the first Democrat in the governor's spot in 26 years.

Even as reports showed Republicans gaining control of the Senate and House on the national level, local Democrats - by far the dominant party in Evanston - had reason to celebrate for what was happening statewide and locally.

"We did great," said Bonnie Wilson, president of the local party. "I think we ought to get Evanston results in the rest of the country. We performed. We outdid everybody else."

Further, from the governor's seat on down, it seemed that local party favorites had some connection.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, went all out for Blagojevich to try for the local party's endorsement before the Democratic primary.

Although she wasn't successful - former Chicago schools chief Paul Vallas was the party members' choice - the push carried over to the general election where the party was squarely behind Blagojevich in his race against Ryan.

Schakowsky and state Reps. Julie Hamos, D-18th, and Jeff Schoenberg, D-58th, won Tuesday night. Schoenberg, of Evanston, was unopposed in his bid to become state senator representing the 9th District.

Local party workers pushed hard for Wilmette Village Trustee Pat Hughes in the 6th Ward, which made up a portion of the 17th state House District. Hughes lost, however, in a very tight race with Republican Elizabeth Coulson of Glenview. (Story on Page 9.)

Firefighters from Local 742 knocked on doors on Election Day, making sure potential voters got to the polls.

"Every house - every Democratic house," corrected firefighter Jeff McDermott about the party's efforts.

Larry Suffredin, also a resident and former chairman of the party, won election to the Cook County Board, giving the city its first presence on that body.

"We've got all the pieces in place in terms of our elected officials," said a pleased Alderman Steven J. Bernstein, 4th Ward, a longtime DPOE member.

Suffredin, also at the DPOE victory party, said Evanston's Democratic strength, polling 70

percent margins in support of its favored candidates, proved invaluable.

"Its base just makes it so much easier for anyone to win who is in a regional race," he said.

The party made high priorities both the gubernatorial and attorney general races, said Jeanne Cleveland Bernstein, the Evanston Township Democratic committeeman.

The DPOE also made special efforts to register voters, particularly in the 2nd and 5th wards, and on Northwestern University's campus.

Bennett Johnson, head of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a DPOE member, said the attorney general race between Democrat Lisa Madigan and the Republican candidate, DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett, was his focus.

"You see, one of the problems of the attorney general's office is that it is not a prosecutor's office, it is an administrative position," he noted.

Johnson said the higher-than-expected turnout may have confounded some in the media who, because of the economy and higher unemployment rates, predicted that fewer people would vote.

He said, though, issues such as health care, Social Security and the cost of prescription drugs are "all real things," and more than enough incentive to persuade people to vote. If Democrats were happy with the way results turned out locally, Republicans were left perplexed.

Ellen Schrodt, the Evanston Township Republican Committeeman, said her party had high hopes going into the election.

"I thought it was pretty disastrous," Schrodt said of the outcome. "To me it was really a poor performance on our part and I felt really sorry for the state of Illinois."

Returns in some precincts showed Republican candidates, like James O'Hara in the 18th District state House race, garnering only 11 votes to 212 for Hamos, his Democratic opponent. In another precinct, considered more moderate, Blagojevich tallied 257 votes to 68 for Ryan. Madigan received 263 votes to 64 for her opponent.

The pattern was repeated throughout the night in Democratic Evanston, and Schrodt, the township's GOP committeeman since 1994, could only search for answers about what to do to reverse the tide in the future.

"Somehow we have to learn to communicate better," she said. "We have to be able to get our opinions, ideas and thoughts out, and I don't think we are doing it."