

# Deseret News

## News analysis: GOP still on top in Utah

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You've heard the political pundits — Americans are angry, sick of Congress, sick of their state legislatures, wanting change.

Democratic candidates throughout the country believe this can be the year when they win the presidency and win larger majorities in the U.S. House and Senate. And Utah Democrats hope for the same types of gains across the board locally.

But while some Western states, like Nevada, Colorado and New Mexico, may indeed be at play for Democrats, new polling shows that in Utah it is still red, red and more red — and we're not talking about the University of Utah here.

A recent survey conducted for the Deseret News and KSL-TV by Dan Jones & Associates shows just what Utah Democrats are up against in 2008:

- Almost two-thirds of registered Utah voters say they plan to vote for the Republican candidate in their state House or Senate race this year. Only 24 percent of voters say they plan to vote for the Democratic Party's candidate in their legislative contests. Republicans hold two-thirds majorities now in the Legislature.
- In the 1st and 3rd Congressional Districts, Republican voters outnumber Democrats three to one. The odds are better in the 2nd District, where Republicans outnumber Democrats two to one.
- In Salt Lake County, where Democrats have been making gains recently, Republicans still account for 40 percent of the voters, Jones found, while Democrats are at 29 percent and independents are at 26 percent.
- Even when "political independents" are added to the Democratic totals, Democrats and independents together don't outnumber Republicans in the 1st and 3rd Districts, which are considered two of the more conservative House seats in America.
- While U.S. Rep. Jim Matheson, Utah's lone Democrat in Congress, has won impressive victories in 2004 and 2006, it is clear that even he must get a sizable number of Republican votes to win his 2nd District again.
- And while a number of Utahns say it is time to let someone new serve in their state House or Senate district, GOP challengers to incumbent Republican legislators have not fared well so far this year — by far most challengers were defeated in their county or state conventions. Only three legislative incumbents have so far been defeated: Sen. Fred Fife, D-Salt Lake; and Reps. Sylvia Andersen, R-Sandy; and Aaron Tilton, R-Springville.

Even embattled state Sen. Chris Buttars, R-West Jordan, eliminated all of his GOP challengers in the Salt Lake County Republican Convention, getting 60 percent of the delegate vote and winning renomination outright.

And half a dozen anti-voucher GOP candidates who thought they had a chance to unseat the Republican incumbent who voted in favor of the private school voucher subsidization bill in the 2007 Legislature — only to see voters kill vouchers last November — went down to defeat in GOP county

and state conventions. Pro-voucher incumbents won nearly across the board.

Kirk Jowers, head of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said the latest numbers are more favorable for Utah Republicans than he would have guessed — given the "voter discontent we find out there."

But Utah Republicans have three things working for them, Jowers said.

There is the history and pattern of most Utahns voting Republican for years, some for generations. And former GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney helped to solidify that pattern this election season in Utah, especially his amazing 90 percent win in the Utah GOP presidential primary in February.

Former Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, a liberal activist, harmed the "Democratic brand name" in Utah, and it will take some time for political moderates like Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon, new city Mayor Ralph Becker and Matheson to bring general good feelings about Democrats back to Utah voters.

Utah Democratic leaders have not yet been able to bring a unified voice of local ethical reform and dominance of special interests against Republicans, especially GOP legislators. There's a political opening there, Jowers believes.

"Republicans need to realize that the self-identifying (as Republicans) for many Utahns is not guaranteed," Jowers said. "And Utah Republicans must know that their advantages could reverse course" — maybe not this election year, but in elections soon to come, Jowers said.

Republican officeholders aren't sitting silently, however, and just counting on past victories to carry them through 2008.

At the state GOP convention, party leaders announced a new, expensive public relations campaign aimed at telling voters just how well they have been served by the Republican majority in Utah.

Party chairman Stan Lockhart said that through a variety of channels, including an updated Web site, party leaders will tell the Utah story — well-managed government, lower taxes, higher spending on public education, a new freeway/main road repair and expansion program, and so on.

And Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem, says that he doubts there will be a new voucher bill before the 2009 Legislature — hopefully taking away one of the Utah Democrats' main campaign themes this election season.

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