

The Other GOP Wave: State Legislatures

By [David Byler](#) - November 11, 2014

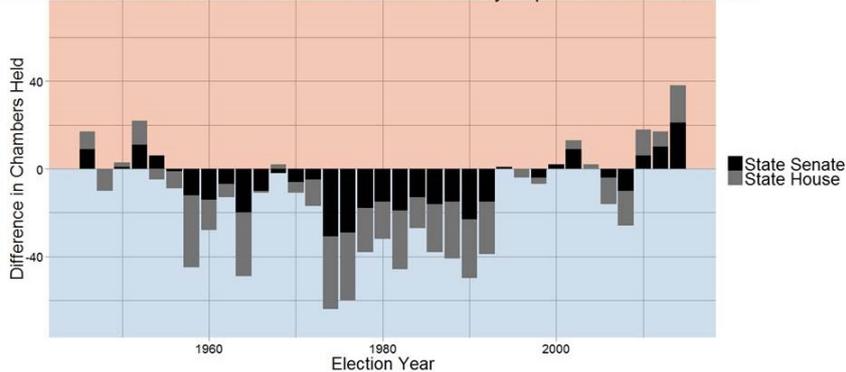


Last Tuesday, Republicans made historic gains in the nation's state legislatures. The GOP now controls [68](#) out of 98 partisan state legislative chambers -- the [highest number](#) in the history of the party. Republicans currently hold the governorship and both houses of the legislature in [23 states](#) (24 if Sean Parnell wins re-election in Alaska), while Democrats have that level of control in only [seven](#).

Democrats dominated these elections for most of the postwar era, often controlling between 60 and 80 chambers. Three specific factors -- the increasing strength of Southern Republicans, recent strategic efforts to gain state chambers, and the national political conditions of 2014 -- together explain how the GOP has turned the tide in recent years and built a massive advantage in the state capitals on Tuesday.

For most of the postwar era, Republicans performed poorly in state legislative elections. Democrats controlled the majority of chambers for most of the second half of the 20th century, but in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Republicans began to make gains.

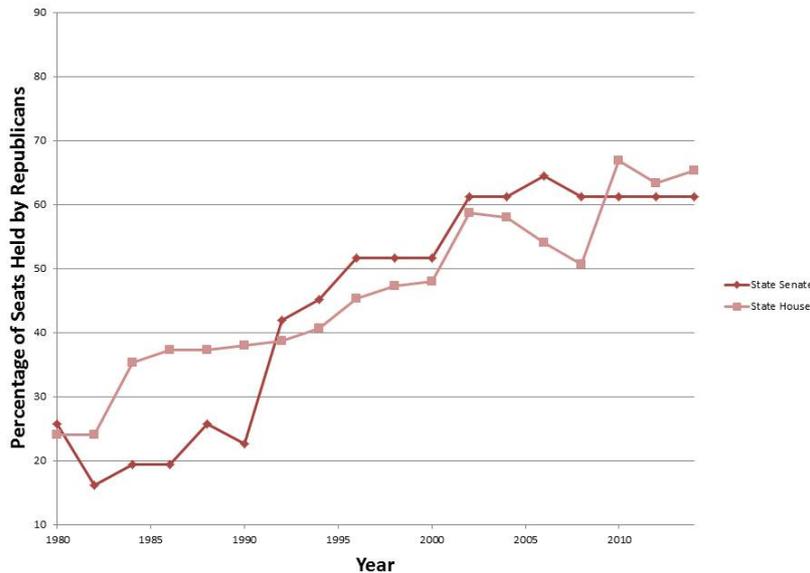
Difference Between Number of State Chambers Held by Republicans and Democrats



The changing partisan allegiance of the South explains much of this shift. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Republicans slowly but surely made inroads into the historically Democratic region. While Republican presidential and congressional candidates began to gain significant ground in the South [as early as the 1950s](#), Democrats held a tight grip on the state legislatures until late in the century.

The trend in Texas exemplifies what happened in many Southern states. Even though Texas has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1976, the GOP did not gain full control of the state legislature until the early 2000s.

Percentage of Texas Legislature Controlled by Republicans



Republicans steadily gained control of more Southern legislatures in the first and now second decades of this century, and they are close to fully dominating the region. The GOP now controls every state chamber in the South except for the Kentucky House of Delegates.

These statehouse wins were not solely a byproduct of Southern partisan realignment -- Republicans also took active, strategic measures to win at the state level across the country. Since the 2004 election, the Republican State Leadership Committee has raised [over \\$140 million](#) to help accomplish this. The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, the RSLC's counterpart, raised [less than half](#) that amount in the same period. While [other groups](#) also contributed significant amounts to these races, these numbers highlight the emphasis the GOP has put on state legislature elections in recent years.

Republicans also spent money on the right races at the right moment. In 2010, they funneled over [\\$30 million](#) into the Redistricting Majority Project, also known as REDMAP. REDMAP funds [helped](#) the party candidates win a majority in Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and elsewhere, giving the GOP greater control over the decennial congressional and state-level redistricting process.

This gave Republicans the opportunity to draw advantageous political boundaries. Most analysts have focused on congressional gerrymandering, so it is difficult to determine exactly how much or how little Republicans benefited from controlling the state legislative redistricting process. That being said, there are [examples](#) of both Republican- and Democratic-controlled state chambers benefiting from redrawing their own districts.

National political conditions also boosted Republican legislative candidates. Saint Louis University professor Steven Rogers has shown how unpopular incumbent presidents [dragged](#) down their parties in these elections. President Obama's lackluster job approval rating -- 42 percent on Election Day according to the [RCP polling average](#) -- hampered Democrats at all levels.

Research also shows that state- and federal-level candidates have significant [coattail](#) effects on candidates down the ballot. In other words, gubernatorial and senatorial candidates that rode the larger Republican wave helped carry down-ticket Republicans to victory. This was especially noticeable in swing states and "blue" states. Nevada's Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval, for example, [won](#) re-election with over 70 percent of the vote, which helped Republicans win control of both houses of the legislature in his state.

Although these GOP gains are historic, they are not permanent. Republicans may have tight control over statehouses in the South and West, but their control in some blue states and swing states is built on sound strategy, significant monetary expenditures and a favorable political climate; in future cycles, Democrats might match the GOP in funds and strategic acumen, and the national climate could shift their way. With so many state legislatures up for election in every major cycle ([87 chambers](#) were up this cycle alone), Democrats still have a chance to reverse these losses in the years ahead.

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