

GOP came close in redrawn 38th District, but Democrats had the numbers

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THE RECORD

The Republican contenders for the state Senate and Assembly seats in the 38th District thought they had a real shot at unseating their opponents, considering they had a redrawn district with more GOP voters, the governor's support and significant campaign funds.

They came close, but in the end, GOP Senate challenger John Driscoll received 47 percent of the vote to state Sen. Robert Gordon's 53 percent. In the Assembly races, incumbent Connie Wagner, D-Paramus, and running mate Timothy Eustace staved off the tough challenges by Driscoll's running mates, Richard Goldberg and Fernando Alonso.

"It was considered to be one of the competitive races where the outcome was in doubt, said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "People thought it could go either way."

Weingart listed three factors that may have contributed to the Democratic win, the first being a more moderate electorate this year.

"If there is a pendulum in American politics that swung somewhat toward the left in 2008 and swung pretty hard to the right in 2010, I think it's reasonable to think from the returns that it's swung a little bit away from the right in 2011," he said.

He also said knowing the race was competitive from the beginning "helped propel the Democrats to work really hard."

In addition, Gordon's reputation in the Senate as a "thoughtful, well-informed" legislator also contributed, he said.

The focus on the race began when the district was redrawn, shifting at least three Republican-tilting towns into it and transferring Democratic-leaning [Fort Lee](#) out.

That's when the Democrats realized it was not going to be a slam-dunk win, said Derek Roseman, campaign spokesman for Gordon, Wagner and Eustace.

Michael Muller, executive director for the Democratic Legislative Majority added: "It was like they were running for open seats, because 52 percent of the population was new to them."

Patrick Murray, the polling director at Monmouth University, said redrawing the district still "gave it a Democratic advantage."

As the race began to heat up in the fall, both tickets' attacks on their opponents' records became more strident.

"I think that's a byproduct of being in a close race," Roseman said.

But the Republicans had [Governor Christie](#) on their side. The governor campaigned with Driscoll, held fund raisers for him and recorded a robocall in the final days of the campaign. Christie also dispatched three campaign aides to work on the race, and Driscoll personally thanked him.

The contests in the 38th were also the second costliest in the state, with \$3 million spent heading into the final weeks of the campaign, according to the state Election Law Enforcement Commission.

Goldberg, who is [Hawthorne's](#) mayor, said it was a close race but "the end result is that there are still more Democrats in the district than Republicans."

"I think we ran a pretty good campaign and everybody worked hard, but in the end it was just tough to overcome," he said.

Material from The Associated Press was used in this article. E-mail: sudol@northjersey.com

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