

Oklahoma One Of Top Legislative Battleground States

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OKLAHOMA CITY

(AP) - Oklahoma is one of the top 10 battleground states this year in the national fight between Democrats and Republicans for control of legislative seats, a political expert said Wednesday.

Oklahoma has been trending toward the Republican party for three decades. In 2004, the GOP gained control of the Oklahoma House for the first time since the 1920s and are now hoping to take over the Oklahoma Senate.

However, across the country, historic trends give Democrats the upper hand this year, Tim Storey, legislative political expert with the National Council of State Legislatures, said Wednesday.

With one exception, the party out of power in a non-presidential election year has picked up legislative seats nationwide. The exception came in 2002 after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack the year before.

Democrats hold a 26-22 advantage in the Oklahoma Senate after Sen. Nancy Riley of Tulsa changed her registration from Republican to Democrat earlier this month. But Republicans remain hopeful of gaining the majority because all seven term-limited senators are Democrats.

Storey, in a national telephone press conference from Nashville, Tenn., said the trend nationwide favors Democrats.

Of the country's 7,382 state legislative posts, 83 percent are up for grabs this year.

Currently, Republicans control two more chambers than Democrats, but Democrats hold a 21-seat advantage across the nation and Storey thinks Democrats may be able to extend that advantage this year.

Other key

legislative contests listed by the NCSL include the Colorado House and Senate, Indiana House, Maine House and Senate, Minnesota House, Montana House and North Carolina House.

Storey said a shift of three or fewer seats in 17 Senates could alter the balance of power, as would a change of five seats at a dozen House chambers.

Polls show swing

voters are agitated, which could be bad news for Republicans, experts say. But Republican State Leadership Committee spokesman Alex Johnson said it is premature to say the GOP is in for significant legislative losses.

"We're going to be in a protection mode this year," Johnson said, while adding the GOP wants to make the most of its opportunities in states like Oklahoma. "I think there are places where things will run counter to what happens nationally," he said.

Michael Davies, executive director of the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, said "the current pro-Democratic national environment gives us the opportunity to defend our 2004 gains and to add further victories."

Davies said there is "clearly a more favorable wind blowing for Democrats" than at any time since 1999.

Storey said the importance of the legislative elections should not be overlooked because of the importance of the next redistricting cycle and since legislatures seem to be "where the action is in public policy."