

November 5, 2009 Thursday

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 677 words

HEADLINE: Experts: Low turnout, taxpayers' anger played roles in Spano's loss

BYLINE: Jorge Fitz-Gibbon

BODY:

WHITE PLAINS - A poor turnout by loyal Democratic voters and a tax-weary electorate spelled Election Day doom for Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano, Lower Hudson Valley political experts say.

That, as well as a regional backlash against incumbents, fueled Spano's stunning loss to Republican challenger Rob Astorino on Tuesday, the experts said.

"I think there are a lot of factors," said Pace Law School professor Ralph Stein. "One certainly is the low turnout, given the heavy Democratic registration. But also you have to factor in the fact that the county executive is really the lightning rod for dissatisfaction with the economy and with taxes."

In addition, Stein said, "I don't think people running for a fourth term generally do very well in this country. It's really not a Republican-Democratic thing."

Spano lost to Astorino 58 percent to 42 percent, based on unofficial results from the Westchester County Board of Elections. This despite a 2-to-1 voter registration advantage for Democrats in Westchester County.

But Astorino tapped heavily into voter outrage over high taxes and a faltering economy. Westchester has the highest taxes of any county in the nation. And regardless of whether it's fair, ballot watchers said many voters put the blame on Spano.

"What Andy Spano never understood was it's not the quality of life in terms of the parks, Playland, the buses," Republican consultant Mike Edelman said. "It's the fact that people's 401(k)s went in half, people's expected home values plummeted by 30 or 40 percent. Some of them lost their jobs and if they didn't lose their jobs, they didn't get raises. Their property taxes continued to soar.

"And they took their anger out, universally, on Andrew Spano," Edelman said. "Because he was the lightning rod, he was the point man, he was the representative with everything that was wrong with local government."

Jeanne Zaino, chairwoman of the Political Science Department at Iona College in New Rochelle, said that incumbents don't fare well in those situations - and often fail to motivate voters the way the opposition does during tough times.

"I will tell you that I talked to many young people in the last two days," Zaino said Wednesday. "There were only a handful of young people that I talked to that were even going to the polls. They didn't see the relevance for college students to go home and vote in this election."

Spano's ouster seemed to mirror a regional trend against incumbents. Republicans won control of Democrat-led legislative boards in Nassau, Dutchess and Ulster counties, while Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi and New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg narrowly won re-election bids despite being heavily favored before Election Day.

In New Jersey, Gov. Jon Corzine conceded the race to Republican Chris Christie.

"There is no question that voters sent a message (Tuesday) that when it comes to local government issues, they are really upset with taxes," said Steven Greenberg, a spokesman for the Siena College Research Institute.

Pundits also maintained that the results were not necessarily based on party loyalty.

Stein, the Pace professor, noted the comfortable victory by Westchester District Attorney Janet DiFiore over GOP challenger Dan Schorr. He said that "supports the fact that voters assessed performance and issues."

"I look at her re-election by such a huge margin as a statement, not so much about party, but about confidence and voters being very well aware of what the issues are, who they trust."

In his victory speech Tuesday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in White Plains, Astorino himself acknowledged that the support of Republican voters was hardly the whole story.

"I could not have done this without the support of Democrats, independents, Republicans, liberals, conservatives," he said. "This was not about one party. This was about everyone reaching out, and we saw these numbers tonight."

The results certainly would seem to bear him out.

Joseph Spector of the Albany Bureau contributed to this report.

LOAD-DATE: November 5, 2009