After several months of hard campaigning in state and national elections, the suspense is finally over. Laura Kelly will be the next governor of Kansas, the third person to serve as Governor in a ten-month span. The Kansas House will have many new faces next session, along with a handful of changes in the Senate, in what otherwise would be considered an “off year”. The election results bring Kansas closer to a complete view of what can be expected in the 2019 and 2020 Legislative Sessions.

Beginning with the national view, elections in the United States Senate resulted in the GOP maintaining control for at least two more years. Kansas Senators Pat Roberts and Jerry Moran were not up for election, thus attention shifted toward the state’s congressional seats. Two seats, in particular, were considered possible upsets over the last several months, generating national scrutiny. Sharice Davids won the Third Congressional District that is almost entirely Wyandotte and Johnson County. She replaces Congressman Kevin Yoder, who held the seat since 2011. Steve Watkins won the Second Congressional District over Paul Davis in a close race. This district encompasses the eastern third of Kansas, with the exception of Wyandotte and Johnson County. Lynn Jenkins represented this district since 2008, however, she opted to retire from politics and not seek re-election. Congressmen Roger Marshall and Ron Estes handily won their re-election campaigns in the First and Fourth Congressional Districts, respectively. Democrats now control the United States House of Representatives.

Beyond the national elections, Kansas will see many changes in the coming months. Laura Kelly was elected as the 48th Governor of Kansas, after a bitter general and primary campaign cycle that stretched over the summer and autumn months. Kelly defeated Kris Kobach by 45,991 votes out of slightly more than one million cast. Independent Governor candidate Greg Orman captured 7% of the vote. In the coming weeks, a new cabinet will be appointed by Governor-Elect Kelly, which changes the leadership of state agencies. Some of these cabinet appointees could be state legislators.

All 125 Kansas House members stood for election, although many ran in uncontested races. After the smoke cleared, 30 new members will head to the Statehouse in January. This equates to a 24% total turnover of the House compared to the 2018 Legislative Sessions. In last night’s election, six incumbent Democrats lost their seats and five incumbent Republicans lost their seats. Thus, Democrats had a net loss of one seat. Of the 125 seats, 86 are now Republican and 39 are Democrat. Additionally, because of the August primary election results where six GOP representatives were defeated, five of the six were moderate-leaning, giving a nudge of power back to the conservative ranks in the Kansas House.

Kansas House Speaker Ron Ryckman plans to retain his spot as the highest-ranking member of the House in the leadership elections that will take place in December. The House Speaker Pro-Tem, Majority Leader and Minority Leader positions will also be elected at this time. It is yet to be seen who will make up the slate of candidates and challengers to incumbent leaders. Once leadership elections are completed, committee leadership and rosters will be selected for the 2019 Legislative Session.

The Kansas Senate will look largely the same, as only one senator stood for election last night. Senator Richard Hilderbrand retained his seat in the special election in southeast Kansas, having replaced outgoing Senator Jake LaTurner, who resigned to become State Treasurer two years ago. However, other state-wide elections had implications on the Senate. Senator Vicki Schmidt, who currently serves as chairwoman of the Senate Public Health & Welfare Committee, was elected as the new Kansas Insurance Commissioner and will vacate her seat in
the Senate. Her replacement will be decided by local precinct committee representatives in the coming weeks and a new committee chairperson will be named by Senate President Susan Wagle. Laura Kelly’s victory will prompt the vacancy of her state senate seat, along with her running mate, Lynn Rogers. Local precinct committee representatives will select their successors too. Kevin Braun will also join the Kansas Senate, taking over for former Senate Steve Fitzgerald, who resigned his seat in September. Braun and Schmidt’s successors will be given committee assignments by Senate President Wagle while Kelly and Roger’s successors will be given assignments by Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley.

Other statewide elections were settled last night. In addition to Vicki Schmidt’s victory as the new Insurance Commissioner, outgoing House Speaker Pro Tem Scott Schwab defeated Brian “BAM” McClendon for Kansas Secretary of State. Attorney General Derek Schmidt and State Treasurer Jake LaTurner were both re-elected.

The general election finally provided clarity with a complete list of legislators but there is still much in question. Until the legislative leadership elections in Topeka, it is unclear who will hold the House’s top posts. Governor Kelly will present her legislative agenda and vision for the state in January’s State of the State address, where school finance can be expected to be her top priority. As Kelly is the current ranking member of the Senate Public Health & Welfare Committee, discussion on Medicaid expansion will certainly be given more attention by the new administration. Though the Governorship changed political parties, the Kansas Legislature composition between Republicans and Democrats is essentially unchanged with 68% and 75% Republican majorities in the House and Senate, respectively. Within some of the changes of the House, the House GOP became slightly more conservative.

Thank you,

Travis Lowe
Braden Heidner Lowe & Associates