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The Winni Strategy

How the Democrats can back the House

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UPI NEWSPICTURES/NEWS.COM

As the Bush administration's problems spread like wildfire, congressional Republicans are playing defense for the first time in years, and Democrats are looking for a strong showing in the '06 midterm elections. "A lot of factors point to this being an extraordinary year" akin to 1994 and 1974, said Democratic direct mail expert Hal Malchow. Democratic pollster Mark Mellman sees a contest of political climate versus structural dynamics. While the "political climate is strikingly in our favor, the structural situation is hard to move," he said.

The Republican Party dictated the policy agenda on Capitol Hill during President Bush's first term. In 2005 Iraq deteriorated at the same time as the White House badly miscalculated on Social Security reform. Then Hurricane Katrina hit, and suddenly it was as if the curtain had been drawn back on the wizard of Oz. The government's perceived ineptitude in responding to an emergency on U.S. soil echoed complaints about the administration's lack of planning and execution in Iraq.

As if a perfect storm of trouble, the GOP has also been pounded by the Lewis "Scooter" Libby leak, the Jack Abramoff ethics scandal, the National Security Agency wiretapping revelations, Vice President Dick Cheney's hunting accident and the public relations disaster over who should control and run the nation's ports.

All this has sent President Bush's popularity dipping into the mid 30s, he is the most unpopular second-term president since Richard Nixon.

In the days of yore, such trouble could mean the majority party might lose 50 to 70 seats in the House of Representatives. But before Republicans start to think this is a political 1929 and prepare to jump from the Capitol dome, their friends should remind them that modern redistricting will probably keep the GOP in power, at least until 2008.

As handicappers Charlie Cook and Larry Sabato will tell you, there are just not that many competitive seats out there. The decline of marginal seats has possibly reached in apotheosis in the nation's most populous state, California, where most observers say only one incumbent, Republican Richard Pombo, Ca.-11, might face a serious

contest. All the other 52 House members are sitting pretty, except, of course, ex-Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (CA-50) who resigned his seat after he admitted that he took bribes from military contractors. The June 6 special election in the conservative northern San Diego County will be an early signal as to how strong a tide Democrats could ride in November.

Conventional Wisdom

According to conventional wisdom, Democrats can pick up six to ten seats but more than that would require them to sweep that table, which rarely happens.

"Congress is an amorphous entity. We don't like it but we don't know what it is. We do know we have a local member, and by and large, we like that member," Republican consultant Peter Valcarce of Arena Communications said.

For the Democrats to do true damage to the Republican majority would require a combination of factors that Valcarce does not expect to see. First he explained, "there is no personification of Congress this year." What about former Majority Leader Tom DeLay? Valcarce says DeLay is not a household name in the same way that Newt Gingrich and Tip O'Neill were and House Speaker Dennis Hastert remains Mr. Anonymous to most people.

Second, when members concentrate on constituent service, and cultivate the home turf, they create bonds with voters that are not easily broken. Valcarce said senior Republican member Phil Crane lost in 2004 because he became too much of a Washington animal and neglected his home base. "You can't lose the personality you started with when you came to Washington," Valcarce said. The key is to "drink from the Potomac but remain the same."

Third, while the Republicans control the both houses of Congress and the executive branch, they remain the anti-Washington party. "It's hard to push the idea that this is a 'Republican Washington culture.' Lobbying is not a product of the Republican Party. The average voter does not even tune into the Abramoff scandal," he said.

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Republicans can maintain control of Congress by staying on the issues, not getting distracted and remembering that all politics is local, Valcarce said.

Under normal conditions, then, because so few seats are truly at play, the Democrats would have to win nearly all the "competitive" races to pick up the 15 seats necessary to make Democrat Nancy Pelosi Speaker of the House.

Add to this, "the structural situation" that Mellman spoke of. Currently in Congress there are not a lot of mismatched seats (i.e. where the House member defies the presidential vote in his or her district). Recent redistricting puts most seats out of play, and only 23 out of 435 seats are open in 2006. With only one open Democratic seat in play, Ohio's 8th, the Democrats will target 10 of 15 open GOP seats where party registration and the presidential vote does not make such an effort absurd. But unless it is an extraordinary year, the Democrats only have a decent shot at winning three or four of those.

The targeted seats include Arizona-8, Colorado-7 and Iowa-1. The Democrats ought to win in Colorado and Iowa because the districts are blue when it comes to presidential voting. The Arizona seat is tougher because it is slightly Republican and immigration is a big issue.

The Democrats face districts that favored Bush over Kerry by three to four points. These include Henry Hyde's 6th District seat in Illinois, the Katherine Harris' 13th District seat in Florida and Michael Bilirakis' 9th District seat also in Florida. In the Hyde and Harris seats, the Democrats appear to have strong candidates running in the primary. But it will be harder in the district north of Tampa, Bilirakis, a popular congressman is being succeeded by his son who has both name recognition and money and will be hard to beat.

A Political Storm

For the Democrats to win the House, 2006 would have to be a year in which well established, well-liked

Republican members are swept away by a surging Democratic tide. Entrenched, popular members sometimes lose, not because of their own mistakes, but because of the national mood puts an irresistible dynamic in motion. In 1994 U.S. Rep. Dan Glickman who represented Wichita and southeastern Kansas for 18 years until the Gingrich storm hit. Before that U.S. Sen. Frank Church who represented Idaho for five terms until the Ronald Reagan led the GOP to a sweep in 1980. As political scientist Bill Connelly puts it, "All politics are local, except when it is national."

"It is too early to tell whether that could happen in November," says Anna Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. It depends, in part, on how angry the public gets with President Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress. In 1993 and 1994 there was "incredible discontent." Those responding to the "Is the nation on the right track or wrong track?" polling question were saying, "Wrong track 73-75 percent of the time. We're not at those numbers, we're in the 60s," says Greenberg.

However, given the deteriorating situation in Iraq – which Greenberg says is still the No. 1 issue with the voters – and the president's sinking favorability ratings, Greenberg says, "it could be an incredibly ugly national environment come October." In the historic 1994 midterm election, the Republicans picked up 54 seats and gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years.

All Politics are Local

Every congressional seat in the nation, all 435 House districts, is a unique community shaped by history, demographics, the economy and partisan attitudes. Democrats on the ground aiming to take Republican seats in key districts in Arizona, Connecticut, Florida and California are conscious of Tip O'Neill's dictum.

"We're focused on the district here. We're not paying attention to other dis-



Harris



DeLay



Shays

tricts. To win we have to speak effectively to Democrats, Independents and moderate Republicans," says Rodd McLeod, campaign manager for state legislator Gabrielle Giffords in AZ-08 where Jim Kolbe represented the district 11 terms before announcing his retirement in November.

Illegal immigration is a huge issue in the Southwest and areas such as Tucson "bear the brunt of federal neglect," says McLeod.

In Rep. Christopher Shays' district in southeast Connecticut (CT-04), the campaign manager for Democrat Dianne Farrell says the war in Iraq is enormously unpopular and that Shays' early and consistent support for the war makes him vulnerable.

"In this district, President Bush is very unpopular because of the war in Iraq," said Adam Wood, campaign manager for Farrell. "The reason Shays is at risk is because of his strong support for the war."

In the Florida district being vacated by Katherine Harris, the local issues are affordable housing, hurricane preparation and the threat of oil drilling near Florida's west coast says Sean Bertram, campaign manager for Christine Jennings, a local banker. Centered on Sarasota, Florida 13 is a moderate swing district with a large number of fiscal conservatives, many elderly voters concerned about Social Security and a substantial veteran population.

"That the national mood is leaning Democratic can't but help," Bertram says, "but you have to have a message that resonates with local voters. Christine is a long time active member in the community and she really does understand the issues that people here confront."

In California's 50th district, north of San Diego, Democrat Francine Busby is making her second run for the seat. She is described by Press Secretary Brennan Bilberry as a "moderate independent who doesn't want to be a puppet of the national party." Bilberry says Busby, a local school board member, favors comprehensive immigration legislation to secure the border

and crack down on employers hiring illegals, abolishing the estate tax and health care reform that uses "tax credits for small business and not an expansive government program." He says the coastal district that includes La Jolla, Del Mar and Encinitas is "very environmentally conscious" and Busby follows the model of Rep. Jane Harman in coastal Los Angeles in being a moderate Democrat who is strong on environmental protection.

In all four districts, Democrats with resumes long on community involvement seek to identify themselves with the sensible center.

Best Laid Plans

In eastern Ohio, Democrat state Senator Charlie Wilson is looking to replace Democrat Ted Strickland who is running for governor. This swing district (OH-06) runs down the eastern border of Ohio through 12 counties: Mahoning, Columbiana, Jefferson, Belmont, Monroe, Noble, Washington, Athens, Meigs, Gallia, Lawrence and Scioto. Wilson plans to focus much of his attention on the negative impact of Washington's foreign trade policies on jobs in the district. He says Washington's current trade stance is "costing Ohio stable, well-paying jobs with benefits. The result denies our families access to affordable health care and [leaves] communities struggling to save their schools."

But the local mortician's campaign hit a snag that demonstrates how small matters, say a signature or two, can have a large impact on individual campaigns and national party prospects.

Ohio campaign law requires 50 valid signatures to get on the ballot and limits the total being turned in to 150. Wilson's campaign collected signatures from Scioto and Belmont counties, both of which are split between two congressional districts. Wilson submitted 96 signatures to qualify for the ballot. In February, the Columbiana Co. Board of elections disqualified half of them because they weren't from his home district. His 48 valid signatures came up two short of qualifying for the ballot. Now both

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*Veteran Paul
Hackett came
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edge of an upset
victory in the
special election in
Ohio's 2nd
District.*

Wilson and the national Democratic Party have a problem and Wilson will probably have to run as a write-in. Fortunately for him and the DCCC, the other two Democrats in the primary race are relatively unknown.

Iraq, Iraq, Iraq

If there is a tsunami powering the Democrats this year, the earthquake across the globe causing the wave is the war in Iraq. Commanders on the ground and supporters of the war effort at home, such as U.S. Sen. John McCain, say it is a situation of two steps forward and one step back. However, to many voters, both Republicans and Democrats, the situation in Iraq looks more like a black hole threatening to become a full-blown foreign policy disaster.

"Iraq remains the No. 1 concern for voters," said Greenberg. In Arizona, McLeod agrees, "It's Iraq, immigration and health care." Individual candidates are more visible in senate races, says Malchow, but in the house races, the vote is more strongly based on "people's mood about the two political parties."

Aiming to alter their brand on national security, the Democrats have recruited a large number of Iraq veterans as candidates. Veteran Paul Hackett came within a razor's edge of an upset victory in the special election in Ohio's 2nd District. And in Rep. Henry Hyde's Illinois district (IL-06), Tammy Duckworth, a Blackhawk helicopter pilot who lost both her legs after being shot down in Iraq, is a critic of the war with powerful credibility.

"While the troops have done an incredible job, Tammy believes Iraq was a bad decision, a mistake and an example of very poor planning," says Duckworth Communications Director Billy Weinberg. In North Carolina, Marine veteran Tim Dunn is running against incumbent Robin Hayes in the 8th congressional district. The Democratic challenger has a succinct position on Iraq.

"I do not support a time table for withdrawal," he says. "I do support setting an exit strategy based on the training provided and the operational readiness of Iraqi secu-

rity forces. Every time we train an Iraqi battalion and it becomes operationally ready, we should send an American battalion home. It's that simple."

Obviously, Iraq is an issue the Democrats will use this fall. Exactly how varies by district and candidate. In Arizona, Giffords' position is that our presence is "fueling the insurrection," says McLeod. "Having destabilized the country we want to establish a responsible governing framework and then strategically redeploy to Kuwait and other countries. It is important to bring the National Guard home for hurricane season." In Connecticut, Dianne Farrell says we must begin with an "honest accounting" of what the situation really is and then set benchmarks for bringing the troops home. Campaign Manager Wood says, "There are a lot of ways we can talk about Iraq all with the goal of educating voters about the war and where Congressman Shays has stood on the war."

Reaching Out to Voters

In 2006, the key for Democrats, says Mellman, is having "strong candidates in place and the resources to capture the wind."

Some of those resources are increasingly precise campaign tools. Mail experts Malchow and Valcarce say campaigns are doing a better job finding and communicating with voters. Malchow says the new political targeting allows strategists to send mail to people "who actually vote, who are actually up for grabs" and to voters "who care about a particular subject."

Political mail has changed over the past 10 years says Valcarce from being focused on the candidate to being "targeted to the audience and what they want." Malchow says

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direct mail is simpler and cleaner today. "It looks more like information. The key is to inform people about the race without telling them what to believe."

Echoes of 1965?

Republicans took control of Congress in 1994 by making the election a national referendum on Bill Clinton's first two years, says Jack Pitney of Claremont McKenna College, who once worked for the Republican National Party. This time the Republicans are hoping that local issues and incumbency guide the election. "If the Democrats succeed at nationalizing the election," says Pitney, "it will be tougher for the Republicans. By historical standards capturing 15 seats is not a national tide, just a series of local ripples. If it is a national tide, then Republicans in soft seats are at risk."

Will Democratic outreach combined with voter anger over the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, Capitol Hill corruption and domestic spying create a

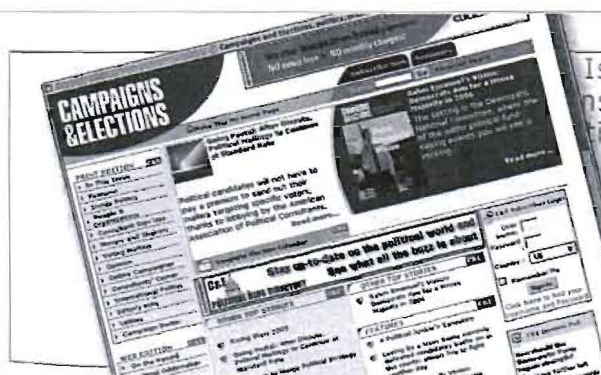
perfect storm opportunity for the opposition party? As Greenberg says, it is too soon to tell.

The Republicans certainly will not be idle. They will be busy "reminding and informing voters about the Republican's meaningful agenda," says Valcarce.

In the end, will that be enough? In 1965, a powerful president, with strong majorities in both Houses of Congress, dominated the political scene. Then Vietnam began to unravel and the Watts Riot lit up the August Los Angeles sky.

Vietnam and Watts, Iraq and Katrina.

Unhappy parallels, both for the nation and the dominant political party. ■



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