

# FROM THE HILL

## Legislative and Political Report

### U.S. Election 2006: Rough Seas or Tidal Wave?

Is the United States ready for a change in congressional leadership? Possibly.

Public opinion polls results indicate a nation in a sour political mood. President Bush is mired in low job-approval ratings, and the Republican-controlled Congress is held in even less regard, as the nation contemplates crises in many directions.

The Democrats—as the minority party—should be poised to pounce on the Republicans. Here's a rare political opportunity. It's their time to provide an alternative. Generic polling has regularly shown throughout the year that the Democrats are the preferred choice for running Congress by as much as 10 to 15 percentage points. This is clearly their moment to seize the reins of power—but they probably won't.

Nothing against the Democrats, it's just that, barring a reversal of the full-strength political tsunami that swept Republicans to power in 1994, the numbers really don't add up.

Even though Republicans have their fair share of vulnerabilities in the Senate, the number of genuinely competitive seats doesn't seem to be enough for Democrats to overcome the GOP's 55-45 majority.

But Democrats remain optimistic, because the Senate's most competitive races in this election cycle require the Republicans to defend their own incumbents. That includes Sens. Rick Santorum (Pa.), Conrad Burns (Mont.), Lincoln Chafee (R.I.), Mike DeWine (Ohio), and James M. Talent (Mo.). Democrats, though, are not without their own vulnerabilities and will be forced to spend a lot of political capital protecting Sens. Debbie Stabenow (Mich.), Maria Cantwell (Wash.), and the open seat in Minnesota.

For the Democrats to have any chance of becoming the Senate majority, they will have to keep all their in-

cumbent seats, knock off all five of the top-tier Republicans, and somehow add a sixth, most likely in the open Tennessee seat being vacated by Majority Leader Bill Frist (Tenn.).

Yes, Democrats will talk about an expanded field of competition—Sen. Jon Kyl in Arizona and Sen. George F. Allen in Virginia—and Republicans will counter with Sens. Ben Nelson

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(Neb.), Robert C. Byrd (W.Va.), and Robert Menendez (N.J.), and the open seat in Maryland. But the only seats that have the potential of changing hands will come from the first-tier grouping. Therein lies the balance of power in the U.S. Senate.

The electoral fortunes of House Republicans are considerably more complicated and unpredictable. Even more than their Senate counterparts, House Republicans have been exhausted by scandal and fractured by ideology. Their fragile 232-203 majority means Democrats need only a 15-seat net gain to reclaim the gavel.

Polling has consistently revealed that likely voters have little to no confidence in the Republican Congress to address and adequately solve the problems most important to them—the economy, health care, immigration, and even homeland security. Congress's abysmal job approval rating of about 25 percent is similar to what the Democratic-controlled Congress received leading up to the 1994 midterm election.

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for reelection this year, the reality is that only a few dozen can be called competitive. Republicans find themselves more vulnerable with about 14 seats considered toss-ups: Jim Kolbe's open seat (Ariz.-8), Bob Beauprez's open seat (Colo.-7), Rob Simmons (Conn.-2), Christopher Shays (Conn.-4), Clay Shaw, Jr. (Fla.-22), Henry J. Hyde's open seat (Ill.-6), John N. Hostettler (Ind.-8), Michael E. Sodrel (Ind.-9), Jim Nussle's open seat (Iowa-1), Geoff Davis (Ky.-4), Heather Wilson (N.M.-1), Charles H. Taylor (N.C.-11), Robert W. Ney (Ohio-18), and Jim Gerlach (Pa.-6). Additionally, 21 other Republicans currently have fights on their hands, but those seats still lean Republican. So, in all, Republicans have a total of 35 seats in play.

House Democrats, in contrast, have the luxury of going on the offensive considering that they do not currently have any seats that can be listed in the toss-up column. However, 10 seats are potential toss-ups even if they still lean Democratic: Jim Marshall (Ga.-8), John Barrow (Ga.-12), Melissa L. Bean (Ill.-8), Leonard L. Boswell (Iowa-3), Charlie Melancon (La.-3), Ted Strickland's open seat (Ohio-6), John M. Spratt, Jr. (S.C.-5), Chet Edwards (Tex.-17), Bernard Sanders's open seat (Vt.-AL), and Alan B. Mollohan (W.Va.-1).

Democrats would appear to be within reach because they have put more GOP-held seats in play than the other way around. But for the Democrats to win the House, they have to hold on to all their incumbents, topple most of the 14 Republicans considered vulnerable, and then pull upsets in a few of the 21 seats that lean toward or favor the Republicans. With such a small playing field of competitive races, that leaves little margin for error.—*Frank Voyack, Senior Legislative and Political Representative*