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CONGRESSIONAL 2002 ELECTIONS : ADVANTAGE GOP?

In 2000, the closest Presidential election in history was decided by a just few hundred Floridian votes, hanging chads, and a 5-4 Supreme Court decision. In 2002, an equally close contest may decide who controls Congress. With the partisan balance in both the House and Senate gossamer thin, the thinnest since 1953, investors once more have to worry about elections. Just as in 2000, the path the nation takes could be decided by just a handful of votes, this time in South Dakota. Einstein remarked, “God doesn’t play dice with the Universe.” However, the gods that control American politics do seem to have a sense of humor these days.

If the Congressional GOP replicates Bush’s victory and wins another squeaker, the GOP may get only a bare plurality of votes yet next year yet control 100 percent of the federal government. With 100 percent control, the Bush Administration can press for an overhaul of Medicare and sweeping tax reform on its terms – and make it happen using unstoppable parliamentary tactics. If Democrats retake the House and hold the Senate, then George W. may watch his poll numbers crumble as Capitol Hill Democrats use their heightened power to put popular bills on his desk he’ll have to veto, and also block his initiatives to attempt to drive him from office in 2004 – just as they did his one-term father, Bush, Sr. To thwart their plans, Bush would be tempted to use his power as Commander-in-Chief to dominate the stage, perhaps leading to military action, not only against Iraq but also other “Axis of Evil” powers, Iran and North Korea.

Struggle for the House: GOP Has the Edge

Presiding over a 223-212 majority, Denny Hastert (R-IL) has a tenuous grip on the Speaker’s gavel, as do GOP Committee Chairmen. If six votes slip away, then Dick Gephardt (D-MO) takes away Denny’s gavel, and Charlie Rangel (D-NY) replaces Bill Thomas (R-CA) as Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Historically, Hastert has reason to fear. Mid-term elections have been unkind to the party occupying the White House. Only twice since Lincoln – in 1934 and 1998 – has the “in” party avoided losing seats. Hastert can afford to lose very few.

This time may be different. In a typical Presidential election year, the winning President candidate pulls weak House candidates from his own party across the finish line. Two years later, the President is less popular, and these weak sisters lose. Candidate Bush didn’t even win a plurality of the nation’s votes, but President Bush is much more popular now than he was when he took the oath of office. Maybe that popularity will rub off now and help GOP candidates. Anyway, there aren’t many weak sisters left. After the 1994 “Gingrich revolution,” the GOP lost seats in 1996, 1998, and 2000; GOP weak sisters have already been defeated.

ADVANTAGE GOP: THEY NEED ONLY 14 OF 40 COMPETITIVE RACES TO REACH 218

| STATE | Safe D Favored | Lean D | Toss Up | Lean R | R Favored | Safe R |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| TOTALS: 435 seats | 179 | 12 | 15 | 8 | 17 | 15 189 |
| 1 Alabama (7)** | 2 | | AL-3 (OPEN) | | | 4 |
| 2 Arizona (8) | 2 | | AZ-1 (OPEN) | | | 5 |
| 3 Colorado (7) | 2 | | CO-7 (OPEN) | CO-4 (OPEN) | | 3 |
| 4 Connecticut (5) | 2 | | CT-05 Johnson (R) v Maloney (D) | CT-02 Simmons | | 1 |
| 5 Florida (25) | 7 | FL-05 Thurman | | FL-22 Shaw FL-24 (OPEN) | 2 | 13 |
| 6 Georgia (13) | 4 | 1 | GA-03 (OPEN) GA-11(OPEN) | | | 6 |
| 7 Indiana (9) | 1 | | IN-07 Carson IN-09 Hill | IN-02 (OPEN) | 2 | 3 |
| 8 Iowa (5) | | | IA-03 Boswell | IA-02 Leach IA-04 Latham | 1 | 1 |
| 9 Kansas (4) | | | KS-03 Moore | | | 3 |
| 10 Kentucky (6) | | | KY-04 Lucas | KY-03 Northrop | | 4 |
| 11 Louisiana (6) | 1 | | | LA-05 (OPEN) | | 4 |
| 12 Maine (2) | 1 | | ME-02 (OPEN) | | | |
| 13 Maryland (8) | 4 | | MD-02 (OPEN) MD-08 Morella* | | | 2 |
| 14 Michigan (15) | 6 | | | MI-10 (OPEN) | 2 | 6 |
| 15 Minnesota (8) | 4 | | | MN-02 Luther* MN-06 Kennedy | | 2 |
| 16 Mississippi (4) | 2 | | | MS-03 Pickering (R) v Shows (D) | | 1 |
| 17 Nevada (3) | 1 | | NV-03 (OPEN) | | | 1 |
| 18 New Hampshire (2) | | | NH-01 (OPEN) | NH-02 Bass | | |
| 19 New Mexico (3) | 1 | | | NM-01 Wilson NM-02 (OPEN) | | |
| 20 North Carolina (13) | 5 | 1 | | NC-08 Hayes | | 6 |
| 21 North Dakota (1) | | | ND-AL Pomeroy | | | |
| 22 Ohio (18) | 5 | 1 | | OH-03 (OPEN) | | 11 |
| 23 Pennsylvania (19) | 5 | 1 | PA-17 Gekas (R) v Holden (D) | PA-15 Toomey | 2 | 9 |
| 24 Tennessee (9) | 4 | | TN-04 (OPEN) | | | 4 |
| 25 Utah (3) | | | UT-02 Matheson | | | 2 |
| 26 Washington (9) | 4 | 1 | WA-02 Larsen | | | 3 |
| 27 West Virginia (3) | 2 | | | WV-02 Capito | | |
| Other States (225) | 114 | 6 | | | 4 | 95 |

* Morella is a Republican, and Luther is a Democrat. ** Each state's 2002 House seat allocation is numbered in parenthesis.

Redistricting shored up many GOP incumbents. Consider two neighboring Congressmen from opposing parties, each who last won 51 percent to 49 percent, who meet to discuss shop. By swapping “bad” precincts both benefit from “free trade” and now win, 60 percent to 40 percent. In 2002, many Congressmen used the census to choose their voters rather than letting voters choose their politicians. Maybe 15 GOP Congressmen will sweat in November. Also, the GOP benefitted from the 42 state redistricting battle, netting 3 safe seats. Overall, the GOP needs to win only 14 of 40 leaning, or toss up, House races to reach 218, a majority. A total of 3 million voters, about one percent of the U.S. population, will vote in 14 Congressional races, and decide this thing.

A powerful Democrat surge indicated by earlier polls has changed, and the parties are in parity again; there is a 65 percent chance the House GOP will hold in 2002. If the vote were today, by winning all eight toss up races the GOP would control 229 seats – a gain of six. If they were to lose all eight toss up races, they would drop to 219, a loss of four, and barely hold.

The Senate: Bush’s Prairie Revenge? GOP has a 45% Chance of Taking Back Control

Senate Democrats control the upper body by a margin of 51-49, due to the defection of Senator Jim Jeffords. This edge has been enough to stall much of Bush’s legislative agenda. If the Senate GOP could gain just one seat, it would reproduce the 50-50 tie the 2002 election established, with Vice President Dick Cheney then casting the deciding vote to organize the Senate for Republicans, 51-50.

At first glance, securing that extra vote seems implausible. Republicans will be defending 20 Senate seats this November, compared to only 14 for the Democrats. A more refined view comes into focus when this list of 34 races is parsed down to only highly competitive contests. Right now, there are six, and each party has three that worry party strategists. Republicans must take 4 of 6 to make Cheney King of the Hill.

Tiny **South Dakota**, with just 1/300th of the nation’s population, may decide everything. In 2000, Bush carried the state, 60 percent to 38 percent for Gore, and two percent for “all others.” There’s no surprise in the fact that Bush carried the state, given that 48 percent of the state’s 471,152 voters registered as Republicans, compared to just 38 percent as Democrats. In fact, since statehood in 1896, South Dakota has voted Democratic for President only four times. What is surprising is that Tom Daschle and Tim Johnson keep on winning, often by tiny margins. Daschle first won a House seat by only 139 votes in 1978. In 1982, South Dakota lost one of its two congressional seats following the 1980 census. Daschle won the incumbent versus incumbent showdown for the sole remaining House seat, 52 percent to 48 percent. In 1986, he ran for the Senate and won again by 52 percent to 48 percent. So far, Senator Johnson is following in Daschle’s early footsteps. He narrowly won his only Senate race, 51 percent to 49 percent, in 1996. By comparison, Rep John Thune (R-SD), Johnson’s opponent has been rolling over patsies, winning 75 percent to 25 percent in his last two outings. If President Bush can turn this race into a partisan fight, Johnson’s probably a goner.

There's also a 50 percent chance **Minnesota**'s Democrat Senator Paul Wellstone will lose to Republican Norm Coleman. Minnesota's electorate is eclectic. In the last eight years, it has voted statewide for the conservative Republican Senator Rod Grams, professional wrestler Jesse Ventura for Governor, and re-elected the liberal Senator, Paul Wellstone. Personalities seem to matter more than ideology in this state. With "undecideds" typically voting 2 to 1 in favor of challengers late in most races, Wellstone's 42 percent to 40 percent advantage documents how vulnerable he appears to be right now.

Missouri Governor Carnahan's widow, Jean Carnahan (D-MO), is in better shape than most expected, but the sympathy vote has probably disappeared and she will have to survive an obstacle course her opponent, former Congressman Jim Talent, will set up for her. Carnahan has a 55 percent chance of winning.

Given Johnson's (D-SD), Wellstone's (D-MN), and Carnahan's problems, the GOP's Senate chances for capturing control would sparkle if they didn't have problems of their own. Their worst problem is in **New Hampshire**. Senator Bob Smith (R-NH) refuses to yield the GOP Senate nomination to Congressman John Sununu Jr. While the primary race is tightening, Sununu Jr. is expected to prevail. But the pounding Sununu takes battling Smith until September 10, primary day, may make him an easy target for Governor Jeanne Shaheen in November. Smith probably would fare worse against Shaheen if he were to win the primary.

GOP Arkansas Senator Tim Hutchinson has drawn as his opponent Democrat Attorney General Mark Pryor. Arkansans have been voting for Pryor family members statewide for decades. Hutchinson also hurt himself by divorcing his wife, despite previously running as a "family values" candidate. This one should be very close.

Tennessee's former governor Lamar Alexander's is everyone's pick to win the GOP nomination and then the general election. However, Alexander hasn't run statewide in many years. He may be a tired face and the public turns fickle. This is a high beta race that starts off as Alexander's to lose. He could.

Other Developing Senate Races

Some observers believe that **Colorado**'s Republican Senator Allard (R-CO) is in trouble. His likely Democrat opponent is Tom Strickland. We don't share that opinion. Allard narrowly beat Strickland last time, and the history of rematches in American politics offers little solace to first time losers. Almost always, they end up second time losers.

Political handicappers also are watching the spirited race to succeed **Texas**' Senator Phil Gramm that is breaking out between Republican Attorney General John Cornyn and Democrat Ron Kirk, the former Mayor of Dallas. Barring major blunders by Cornyn, we have a hard time believing that Texas would turn down a late October appeal by President Bush to vote in his man if such an appeal proved necessary.

The **Montana** Senate race may prove a sleeper. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) *should* have an easy time of it. Baucus voted for the Bush tax cut last year, probably inoculating himself against purely partisan attacks. But Montana is a very red, "red state," having voted for Bush 240,178 (58%) over Gore 137,126 (33%). However, Montanans are comfortable with Baucus; he been their Senator since 1978. To stay safe, Baucus will vote more like a Republican this year. He's successfully used this tactic in the past. State Senator Mike Taylor (R-MT) also will have to prove that he can hit big league pitching.

THE SIX 2002 SENATE RACES THAT MATTER MOST

| State | GOP Senator | Democrat Challenger | Most Recent Poll* |
|----------------------|---|------------------------------|---|
| Arkansas | Tim Hutchinson | Attorney General David Pryor | Hutchinson 51% Pryor 43%; (Tarrance) May 14, 2002 |
| New Hampshire | Bob Smith/ Rep John Sununu (GOP Primary) | Governor Jeanne Shaheen | Sununu 55% Smith 38% Amer. Research; June 3, 2002 Sununu 50% Shaheen 42% (U of New Hampshire) April 18, 2002 |
| Tennessee | L. Alexander likely GOP nominee v Cong Ed Bryant (OPEN) | Rep Bob Clement | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | Democrat Senator | GOP Challenger | |
| Minnesota | Paul Wellstone | St. Paul Mayor, Norm Coleman | Wellstone 42% Coleman 40% (Mellman Group) April 11, 2002 |
| Missouri | Jean Carnahan | former U.S. Rep Jim Talent | Carnahan 50% Talent 44%; (Zogby) April 30, 2002 |
| South Dakota | Tim Johnson | Rep John Thune | Thune 46% Johnson 42%; (McLaughlin) May 14, 2002 |

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