

## The Other Races on the Ballot: The Senate

**September 29.** Lest we forget with all of the emphasis on the presidential election, on November 2 we as a nation will also elect (or in most cases reelect) all 435 members of the House of Representatives and 34 of the 100 United States Senators. In mid-August we wrote about the lack of competition in House races. This week we turn to contests for seats in the Senate.

The stakes are very high in these Senate races. The Republicans currently control the Senate by the narrowest of margins, 51-48, with the one independent, James Jeffords of Vermont, caucusing with the Democrats. Thus a swing of only one seat from the GOP to the Democrats would lead to a tie and would put control of the Senate in the hands of the Vice President. If President Bush is reelected, the GOP would then retain control; if Senator Kerry is elected, the new Vice President, John Edwards, would cast the deciding vote, allowing the Democrats to organize the Senate as the majority party.

Of the seats that are being contested, 19 are currently held by Democrats, 15 by Republicans. So the Democrats would have to successfully defend all of their seats and pick up one from the GOP side (or pick up one more seat than they lose). How likely is this? All seats are not equally competitive, as we discussed when looking at the House, but Senate seats are more competitive than House seats. Let's break down the 34 contests.

Incumbents have an advantage when seeking reelection to the Senate, but not so great an advantage as do Members of Congress. (See chapter 7 and also figures 3.6 and 3.7.) Eighteen incumbents, ten Democrats and eight Republicans should win reelection with relative ease. Examples are Democrats Dodd (CT), Inouye (HI), Mikulski (MD), and Schumer (NY), and Republicans McCain (AZ), Grassley (IA), Gregg (NH), and Voinovich (OH). One other Democrat (Boxer [CA]) and three Republicans (Bunning [KY], Bond [MO], and Specter [PA]) face serious challenges but are expected, by most pundits, to survive.

However, 4 out of the 26 incumbents seeking reelection face serious challenges and are engaged in contests close enough that most prognosticators are hedging their bets. Three of these are Democrats (Patty Murray [WA], Russ Feingold [WI], and, perhaps most surprisingly, the Democratic leader in the Senate, Tom Daschle [SD]). The Daschle case is extremely interesting because his opponent, Congressman Jim Thune, has run and won statewide just as has Daschle, because South Dakota has only one representative in the House. South Dakota is normally thought to be a Republican state, but Daschle has been personally popular for many years. Both parties are investing huge sums in this race, money that goes far in a relatively inexpensive state.

The Republican incumbent who is under the most serious challenge is Lisa Murkowski from Alaska. She faces a problem perhaps even more difficult than does Daschle. Murkowski was appointed to the Senate to succeed her father, who had been elected governor. The problem, of course, is that she was appointed by her father, raising charges of nepotism. And, while the Murkowski name is well known in Alaskan politics, Lisa Murkowski has never run statewide. She faces Tony Knowles, the former governor, who has, of course, run and won statewide. However, Alaska is generally a Republican state. The race is seen as too close to call.

Eight senators have retired and are not seeking reelection. The Democrats are expected to pick up the Republican seat in Illinois with some ease. The Republicans seem assured of picking up the Democratic seat in Georgia. Four of the other six open seats were held by Democrats in the South, in Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Louisiana. Each of those states has been moving in the Republican direction in recent years; President Bush is favored to win three of them quite easily. And both parties are fielding strong candidates in each contest. The open seats previously held by Republicans are in Colorado and Oklahoma, again two normally Republican states. Again, each party has fielded a strong candidate in each of those races. All six of these open seats are considered to be toss-ups.

Where does that leave us? For the Democrats to take control of the Senate, incumbents Daschle, Murray, and Feingold have to win, the Democratic candidates have to win the four open southern seats (Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina), and either Knowles must beat Murkowski or the Democratic candidate must win in either Colorado or Oklahoma. If the Democrats lose any of the "must" wins cited above, they have to offset that loss with another victory from the seats currently held by Republicans. Put succinctly, that is a tall order. Not impossible, but a tall order. More likely is that some of those toss-up races will break for the Republicans, and they will pick up a seat or two in the Senate.

What will determine the result in these races? You should look at a number of factors. First, generally these races are run on state issues, not on the issue of which party will control the Senate. However, if the presidential race breaks strongly in the direction of one party or the other in the last days of the campaign, it is likely that that party's candidate for the Senate will benefit as well. Second, timing matters. The Florida primary was just held. Former Education Commissioner Betty Castor won the Democratic nomination to oppose former Bush Housing Secretary Mel Martinez. But Florida has been wracked by hurricanes since the primary. Campaigning has only just begun. It is difficult to see how the electorate can focus on this campaign with so much concern about hurricane relief efforts and attention from the presidential candidates. But it could be a crucial race in determining the overall outcome. Third, Louisiana has a system different from that elsewhere in the country (see the discussion on pages 210-211 in chapter 6). The "non-partisan" primary is to be held on November 2, with a run-off if no candidate receives a majority—the exact result that occurred in 2002. If this is the case, control of the Senate might still be unknown for weeks after the general election. Finally, the fate of some particular Republican candidates deserve attention: Murkowski, because of the unique manner in which she assumed office; Pete Coors in Colorado, because of the influence of personal money and corporate name recognition in that race; and former Representative Tom Coburn in Oklahoma, because he won a primary over more well-known Republicans by stressing support for a most conservative social agenda. Wins by these Republicans—particularly the latter two—could send important signals to future candidates.

One final note: Studying House elections and studying Senate elections are basically different tasks. Students of House elections normally deal with all of the elections held in one year, generalizing about the process. Students of Senate elections often concentrate on individual races and specific candidates. Some would claim that the former is more scientific; the latter is often more fun.