

The Race for the House Is All But Over

August 18. The presidential campaign could not be more heated. Campaigns are parrying for daily headlines. The President and Senator Kerry are criss-crossing the nation, looking for the few votes that may well determine who is inaugurated in January. Their surrogates are touting their messages to any who will listen. And those now ubiquitous 527 committees are attacking each candidate, viciously and at times unfairly, a theme to which we shall return in the weeks ahead.

While that campaign moves ahead under full steam, the race for control of the House of Representatives is all but over. Well, not quite! But as far as many of your representatives are concerned, there will be no real campaign this fall. How can that be?

First, the facts. Every one of the 435 seats in the United States House of Representatives is up for reelection every two years. Every ten years the seats are reapportioned among the states and redistricted within the various states to assure that every district meets the constitutional tests. (See chapters 6 and 7 in the text.) In the average year fewer than 10% of the members of Congress retire; of those who seek reelection, more than 90% are successful.

Now, the 2004 context. Let's start with that "more than 90% are successful" statement. That is the average. But in each of the last three elections, the number of incumbents who have lost in the general election has been about 2% of those who have been on the ballot. A much smaller number have lost in primary elections as well. Right now the number of retirees looks to be quite low, 32 overall as of today—fewer than 15 in seats that might be competitive. Most competition comes in open seats, but there are few of them this time around and fewer of those that are open are likely to be competitive.

The Republicans currently control the House, with 228 members; the Democrats have 206, and there is one Independent. Democrat Rodney Alexander of Louisiana's 5th C.D. recently announced that he is switching from the party in which he was elected to the Republican party, an announcement he made on the eve of the filing deadline in Louisiana. As a result, the Democrats will need to pick up 13 seats to gain control of the House. Thirteen seats does not seem like that many out of 435, just 3%. But remember the lack of competition noted above. A number of those who cover House elections closely rate seats throughout the election year. Among the most authoritative are the Cook Political Report (www.cookpolitical.com), the Rothenberg Political Report (www.rothenbergpoliticalreport.com), and Congressional Quarterly's *CQ's Politics Daily*. None of these analysts thinks that more than 30 or 35 seats in total are "in play," that is, are seats in which the winner is not all but determined already. The Cook Political Report, as an example, says that there are now 13 seats that are truly toss-ups and another 21 that lean toward one party or the other but that could shift. Of these, only 17 are currently controlled by Republicans. That means that the Democrats, in order to take over control of the House, would have to win 13 of the 17 competitive seats that the Republicans now hold—and they would have to win all of the competitive seats that they currently hold. For every one of their seats that they lose, they would have to pick up another GOP-held seat.

Suddenly, the 13 seats that the Democrats need to pick up seems like a high mountain to climb, not such a manageable task. The winner in over 400 seats is

already known in advance. (To be fair, in each election one finds an upset or two among the seats that the experts feel are not competitive. But it is amazing that they are wrong on so few.) In over 60 of those seats one major party or the other is not even running a candidate. In many others the candidate is a sacrificial lamb, someone who is unknown, unsupported, and underfunded. And in many others, relatively strong challengers face overwhelming odds, because of the strength of the incumbent or the partisan lay of the land, created at the last redistricting to guarantee the seat for one party or the other.

So we return to our original premise. "The race for the House is all but over." The Democrats could gain control in November, but it would take a congruence of events that few prognosticators think possible. There will be intense competition in about 35 districts, the kind that many of us think should be found all over the country. But if you do not live in one of those districts, you will see little, if any, congressional campaigning. And in our view at least, our democracy suffers as a result.