

# US: Another Senate Democrat steps down to aid Republicans

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Senator John Breaux of Louisiana, a leading figure in the right wing of the Democratic Party and a frequent ally of the Bush administration, announced his retirement December 15, an action which seems calculated to cement Republican control of the US Congress.

A three-term senator who was expected to win reelection in 2004 against only token opposition, Breaux is retiring at the age of 59—in stark contrast to the usual practice in which senators hold onto office as long as possible, accumulating seniority and gaining positions of power in the Senate committee structure.

His decision brings to five the number of Democratic senators from southern states who have announced plans to retire: the others are Bob Graham of Florida, John Edwards of North Carolina, Ernest Hollings of South Carolina and Zell Miller of Georgia.

Edwards and Graham are stepping down after entering the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, although Graham quit the presidential campaign in September after failing to win significant support in the party establishment. Hollings retired at an advanced age, after nearly four decades in the Senate. Miller retired after only a single appointed term, issuing a public blast against his own party and virtually inviting the Republicans to take over his seat.

With the Republican Party holding only a one-seat majority, even a single seat open seat could play the critical role in deciding control of the Senate. The National Republican Senatorial Committee hailed Breaux's announcement with a news release headlined "Democrats lose another!" and declaring "Louisiana officially up for grabs."

The Republican goal in 2004 is not so much to retain control—that is largely conceded by the Democratic "opposition"—but to increase its majority sufficiently to

make it possible to assemble the 60-vote majority required to close debate and force action on disputed issues. This would put an end to the procedural delays which the Democrats have occasionally used to block judicial nominations or force votes on amendments to key legislation.

Breaux is not as open as Zell Miller in his pro-Bush views, and is considered likely to support a fellow Democrat, Congressman Chris John, to succeed him next year. But his entire Senate career has been bound up with the increasingly right-wing orientation of the Democratic Party.

He first entered congress in 1972, at the age of 28, after several years as a legislative aide for then-congressman Edwin Edwards, twice governor of Louisiana and later convicted of bribe-taking and imprisoned. In 1986 Breaux moved up to the Senate, replacing Russell Long, heir to the Louisiana political dynasty founded by populist demagogue Huey Long in the 1930s.

In his 17 years in the Senate, Breaux gained a reputation as a fierce defender of the state's oil and chemical industries, a conservative on social issues like abortion, and a major player in the backroom dealmaking with Republican and Democratic administrations. His philosophy was summed up in the cynical remark, made after he backed Ronald Reagan's 1981 tax cut for the wealthy in return for special provisions for the oil and sugar industries, that his vote could not be bought, but "it can be rented."

Breaux distanced himself from the 2000 Democratic presidential campaign, tacitly helping Bush carry Louisiana, and was rewarded with an invitation to join Bush's cabinet, which he declined. He voted to confirm the nomination of John Ashcroft as attorney general, and played a key role in the passage of Bush's 2001 tax

cut which gave the wealthy the lion's share of a \$1.35 trillion bonanza. Most recently, he was one of only two Senate Democrats permitted by Republicans to participate in drafting the Medicare legislation which passed Congress last month, opening the way to privatization of the system of paying for health care for the elderly.

According to an account in the *Los Angeles Times*, Breaux decided to give up his Senate seat and cash in on his Washington connections, intending to form a lobbying partnership with retiring Republican Senator Don Nickles, an arch-conservative from Oklahoma. "I can either try to beat Strom Thurmond's record, or I can play tennis in Bermuda on weekends," he told one friend, the newspaper reported.

More than purely mercenary considerations are involved, however. Breaux's retirement is part of a protracted political process, which amounts to the voluntary surrender of power by the Democratic Party. This organization has exhausted whatever popular support it once had and has moved so far to the right that it has relatively few policy differences with the Republican Party.

The Republican Party controls the US Senate by a narrow 51-48 margin, with one independent, who votes with the Democrats. It has maintained control of the upper house of the US Congress for most of the last decade, not so much by virtue of popular support, as by the unwillingness of the Democratic Party to seriously oppose it.

From 1994 on, Republicans have captured 20 Democratic-held seats: 12 followed the retirement of Democratic incumbents, two were the result of Democratic incumbents switching parties and becoming Republicans, two followed plane crashes which killed the Democratic candidate (Paul Wellstone of Minnesota and Mel Carnahan of Missouri), and four were defeats of elected Democratic incumbents by Republican challengers.

The 12 Democratic captures included eight Republican incumbents defeated by Democratic challengers, three cases where Republicans retired and Democrats won the race to succeed them, and the death in office of Republican Paul Coverdell of Georgia, who was replaced by the appointment of Zell Miller, a nominal Democrat.

These figures give concrete numerical expression to

the political demoralization of the Democratic Party. During the past decade Democratic challengers have defeated Republican incumbents twice as often as Republican challengers have ousted Democratic incumbents. However, Republican candidates were four times as likely to benefit from the resignation or retirement of a Democratic incumbent.

Many of the Democratic "retirements" were by men still healthy and active, including such nationally prominent senators as George Mitchell of Maine, Sam Nunn of Georgia, Bill Bradley of New Jersey, and Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, now joined by Breaux, Graham, Edwards and Miller. Thus, despite the incessant media glorification of the Republican Party as politically unchallengeable (propaganda the Democratic Party hierarchy believes even more fervently than the Republican), the Democratic Party's collapse is largely self-willed.

(For the record, the four elected Democratic incumbents defeated by Republican challengers were James Sasser of Tennessee in 1994, Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois in 1998, Charles Robb of Virginia in 2000, and Max Cleland of Georgia in 2002. The eight Republican incumbents defeated by Democratic challengers were Al D'Amato of New York and Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina in 1998, Slade Gorton of Washington, John Ashcroft of Missouri, Rod Grams of Minnesota, Spencer Abraham of Michigan and William Roth of Delaware in 2000, and Tim Hutchinson of Arkansas in 2002.)



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