

Democrats' pro-war campaigns produce debacle in congressional races

Republicans strengthen grip on US House and Senate

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6 November 2004

The US congressional elections, which took place simultaneously with the presidential vote, saw gains for the Republican Party of four seats in the Senate and three or possibly four in the House of Representatives.

The shift in the House of Representatives was minimal and will not significantly increase Republican control because the rules of the lower house give even the barest majority near absolute power as long as it maintains party discipline.

The Senate gains were more substantial, shifting the balance from 51-48 to 55-44. (One former Republican-turned independent, James Jeffords of Vermont, usually votes with the Democrats). This will give the Republican Senate majority more leverage. For the past two years they have had the narrowest of margins, dependent on Vice President Cheney's tie-breaking vote if even a single Republican senator broke ranks. The gain of four seats will make such tie-breakers less frequent.

It is as yet unclear, however, whether it will be easier for the Republican leadership to muster the 60 votes required to force a vote on most issues. The Republican gains came through the replacement of retiring southern Democrats who had frequently voted with the Bush administration against Democratic filibusters. One of the southern Democrats, Zell Miller of Georgia, essentially functioned as a member of the Republican caucus and served as the keynote speaker at Bush's nominating convention last summer.

The five open seats in southern states where Democratic incumbents retired include North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Louisiana. Republican candidates—four sitting congressmen and one Bush cabinet official—captured all five seats. This more than offset the loss of two open Republican seats to Democratic challengers in Illinois and Colorado.

The Republican net gain rose to four with the defeat of Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, who

lost by a bare 4,500 votes out of nearly 400,000 cast to former congressman John Thune, a Christian fundamentalist who was heavily backed by the Bush administration.

Daschle was the first party leader in the Senate to be defeated for reelection in more than half a century. Republican leaders in Washington targeted him for defeat, recruited Thune for the race, and poured money into what became the costliest Senate race of the year, with more than \$40 million spent, about \$100 for every vote.

Daschle, who epitomized political cowardice and conciliation, was a fitting symbol of the Democratic Party's prostration before the Bush administration and the ultra-right. Nevertheless, Republican campaign propaganda portrayed him as the most dangerous man in Washington, who single-handedly foiled the implementation of Republican policies.

The South Dakota contest became the most closely watched Senate race. The defeat of Daschle has already been interpreted by other Senate Democrats as a warning that they must not stand in the way of Bush's second-term agenda.

In three other closely contested seats, Republican incumbents won narrow victories in Alaska and Kentucky, and former congressman Tom Coburn held the Oklahoma seat given up by retiring senator Don Nickles. The Democrats won only a single closely contested race, in Colorado, where state attorney general Ken Salazar defeated Republican Peter Coors, heir to the beer company fortune.

Salazar won by running an unabashedly right-wing campaign, in which he publicly repudiated Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's characterization of the Iraq war as a mistake, and sought to outflank his opponent from the right on such questions as "homeland security" and the "war on terror." Salazar's openly pro-war stance was typical of most other Democratic candidates in closely contested Senate races.

In the House of Representatives the Republicans made a small gain, picking up a net total of three new seats, giving them a 231-201 majority, with one independent who votes with the Democrats. Two seats in Louisiana, previously split between the parties, are awaiting runoff votes next month.

Only a handful of House seats changed hands in 2004, with Democrats taking Republican seats in Colorado, Illinois, New York and Georgia, while Republicans took a Democratic seat in Indiana.

The Republican net gain was due entirely to the super-gerrymandering of Texas, carried out at the instigation of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, despite the fact that the state had already redistricted after the 2000 census. After the Republicans won control of the state legislature in 2002, DeLay pushed for redrawing congressional district boundaries a second time—a blatantly partisan exercise never previously attempted in American politics—in order to increase the number of safe Republican seats.

As a result, five incumbent Democrats were placed in new districts where they either faced incumbent Republicans, or top-heavy Republican majorities in the voting population. Four of the five redistricted Democrats lost, and the Republicans picked up two new seats as well, giving them a total gain of six seats in a single state, offsetting the Democratic gain of three seats in the other 49 states. But even without the Texas skullduggery, the Republicans would have retained a majority in the House.

The overall result of the congressional elections means that the Republicans will control the House for a dozen years—from their 1994 election sweep until at least 2006—the longest period of continuous Republican control since before Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal period. Republicans have controlled the Senate as well for the past decade, with the exception of an 18-month period in 2001-2002 after Jeffords defected to the Democrats.

This extended period of right-wing control is not only testimony to the political bankruptcy of the Democratic Party, which has been unable to mount any effective challenge, it is also a product of the increasingly undemocratic character of the US electoral system.

The overall picture in the House is one of near immobility, as 208 of 210 incumbent Republicans won reelection, along with 186 of 191 incumbent Democrats. (Four of the five losing Democrats were defeated by incumbent Republicans in contests forced by redistricting).

Gerrymandering—the carving up of districts using voter registration patterns and sophisticated computer software to make the seats safe for one party or another—has made a successful challenge to a sitting congressman nearly impossible in most districts. According to figures compiled by the Center for Voting and Democracy, 95 percent of all

House races were decided by a margin of more than 10 percent, and 83 percent were decided by 20 percent or more—landslides in which the winning candidates could safely ignore their opponents throughout the campaign.

As for the Senate, while competitive races are more common, because state boundaries cannot be altered to carve out safe districts, only nine of the 34 seats up for vote in 2004 were closely contested. The price of victory in a contested race has gone up astronomically as well: the South Dakota race, at \$40 million, sets a new milestone, but \$10 million is now the standard cost for a Senate campaign, and \$1 million for a contested seat in the House of Representatives.

There is an additional factor in the Senate: the deliberately undemocratic distribution of the seats, two to each state regardless of population, laid down in the US Constitution. This provision was initially adopted as a way of insuring acceptance of the new constitution by all 13 states, to assure the smaller states they would not be dominated by a few populous ones like New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

Today, however, the population disparity between the largest state—California, with over 35 million people—and the smallest—Wyoming, with 500,000—dwarfs the disparities of early US history. A senator from California represents 70 times as many people as one from Wyoming, but their votes count equally in the Senate. The result is that only 16 percent of the population in the 26 smallest states can elect a Senate majority, regardless of the sentiments of the remaining 84 percent.

These disparities are reflected directly in the 2004 congressional vote. The Republicans made a net gain of four seats in the Senate despite receiving 3.5 million fewer votes for their Senate candidates than the Democrats.

Democratic candidates won by large margins in heavily populated states like California, New York and Illinois. While Republican candidates won in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida and Georgia, the margins were generally narrower. They also won such lightly populated states as Alaska, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and New Hampshire.



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