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In Case You Missed It

Roll Call: Landscape Shift Means More Trouble for House Democrats

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Landscape Shift Means More Trouble for House Democrats

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Already prepared to deal with challenging midterm turnout dynamics that favor the GOP, national Democratic strategists now find themselves looking at higher unemployment numbers, potentially divisive foreign policy decisions and a president who lacks the luster that he had immediately after his inauguration.

This new political reality has a significant effect on the election prospects of dozens of Democratic candidates for the House, whether incumbents, challengers or open-seat hopefuls.

More than a dozen Democratic Members who were already headed for competitive contests now find themselves in even more serious danger in next year’s midterm elections. Before the election cycle ends, most of them are likely to be underdogs for re-election.

Those at greatest risk represent Republican-leaning or conservative districts, as well as districts where a big turnout for Barack Obama by African-American and younger voters

helped Democratic candidates for Congress.

The list of Democratic freshmen most affected by the national shift includes Reps. Bobby Bright (Ala.), Walt Minnick (Idaho), Frank Kratovil (Md.), Travis Childers (Miss.), Harry Teague (N.M.), Steve Driehaus (Ohio), Mary Jo Kilroy (Ohio) and Tom Perriello (Va.).

Three of those freshmen — Kratovil, Driehaus and Kilroy — face rematches, while Teague is being challenged by former Rep. Steve Pearce (R), who gave up his seat to run for the Senate.

Given midterm issues and the current political environment, Democrats seem certain to lose at least two of those four seats, with a loss of three quite probable and a Republican sweep of all four certainly possible.

Though the next tier of at-risk Democrats initially appeared slightly less vulnerable, Reps. Betsy Markey (Colo.), Suzanne Kosmas (Fla.), Bill Foster (Ill.), Eric Massa (N.Y.) and Mark Schauer (Mich.) also find themselves in significantly more trouble.

Alan Grayson (Fla.), who started off in this group of freshmen, now looks worse off after his self-inflicted wound on the House floor, even though Republicans do not yet have a top-tier challenger.

One way to look at Democratic problems is to focus on open seats. With Republican Reps. Mark Kirk (Ill.), Jim Gerlach (Pa.) and Mike Castle (Del.) running statewide, Democrats might look like a lock to make important open-seat gains. But they aren't, at least not yet.

Democrats could well win all three, but Republicans have recruited potentially strong candidates in the Illinois and Pennsylvania districts, and they have good pickup opportunities of their own in the open seats being vacated by Democratic Reps. Charlie Melancon (La.) and Joe Sestak (Pa.).

At the moment, Democrats are likely to pick up two GOP-held seats: Castle's and that of freshman Rep. Anh "Joseph" Cao (La.).

Of course, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has made a significant recruiting effort to put additional Republican-held seats into play by recruiting challengers to Reps. Charlie Dent (Pa.), Patrick Tiberi (Ohio), Mary Bono Mack (Calif.), Lee Terry (Neb.) and, yet again, Michele Bachmann (Minn.). But the overall direction of the cycle makes it much more difficult for those Democratic challengers than it would have been in 2006 or 2008.

If House losses in the 2010 elections are limited to the districts already mentioned, some Democratic insiders will breathe a huge sigh of relief, since net Democratic losses would be only in the eight- to 15-seat range. That would mean the political environment didn't drown

plenty of Democrats in potentially dangerous districts.

A gain of 12 to 15 seats would be a good showing for the GOP, but it would be a disappointment to overly optimistic Republicans who expect gains of at least three dozen seats.

Over the past two cycles, Democrats were able to defeat popular Republican incumbents because voters were so dissatisfied with President George W. Bush and his party. GOP incumbents who hadn't been in trouble for years suddenly found themselves in tough races.

This cycle, Democratic strategists hope to avoid the same fate for long-term incumbents such as Reps. Loretta Sanchez (Calif.), Ike Skelton (Mo.), Bart Gordon (Tenn.), Vic Snyder (Ark.), Rick Boucher (Va.) and Chet Edwards (Texas), as well as for more recently elected Members who don't yet look highly vulnerable, including Reps. Christopher Carney (Pa.), Larry Kissell (N.C.), Glenn Nye (Va.) and John Adler (N.J.).

The shift in national mood has boosted GOP fundraising, and Democratic strategists must hope that core constituencies aren't disappointed by how Congress ultimately deals with health care reform or how the president handles Afghanistan and Iran.

But November 2010 is still a long way off. Democrats could win another House special election next month, and we don't yet know how Congress will ultimately deal with health care, what will develop in Afghanistan and Iran, or where the economy will be. But even if the news is more upbeat for Democrats a year from now, the new political landscape is bad news for the dozen or so House Democrats at greatest risk.

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