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In Case You Missed It

L.A. Times: GOP Poised For Comeback In Midterm Elections

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Albuquerque, NM—The following Jan. 1st *Los Angeles Times* article discusses a likely GOP comeback in the 2010 elections. Notably, the author highlights NM’s 2nd Congressional race as one to watch, opining: “Now it is Teague who has to defend the president, his vote for Obama’s economic stimulus bill and, especially, his support for legislation to fight global warming, which could have a serious effect on New Mexico’s oil and gas industry.”

GOP Poised For Comeback In Midterm Elections

Republicans Could Have A Big Year, But They Need To Win 40 House And 11 Senate Seats To Regain Control Of Congress. That's A Tall Order.

Read this story online at:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-na-midterm1-2010jan01,0,453106.story>

Mark Barabak
January 1, 2010
Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Roswell, N.M. - After losing the White House and nearly 70 congressional seats in the last two elections, Republicans are poised for a strong comeback in 2010, with significant gains likely in the House and a good chance of boosting their numbers in the Senate and statehouses across the country.

The results could hamper President Obama's legislative efforts as he prepares to seek reelection and reshape the political landscape for a decade beyond, as lawmakers redraw congressional and state political boundaries to reflect the next census.

All 435 House seats, 36 in the Senate and the governorships of 37 states will be on the ballot in November. Democrats are favored to retain the Massachusetts seat of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy in a special election Jan. 19.

Some of the Democrats' most prominent figures, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Senate Banking Committee Chairman Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut, are in serious danger as they seek reelection. Both would probably lose if elections were held today.

"It all adds up to a pretty bad year for the party in power," said Jennifer Duffy, an analyst with the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "How bad? I'm not sure we know yet."

However, for all Republicans stand to gain, the party still has problems. Polls show that many voters, though unhappy with Democrats, are even less enamored of the GOP.

Steve Pearce, a former three-term Republican congressman, criticizes both parties as he campaigns for his old House seat in New Mexico, saying the explosion in spending under President George W. Bush has only gotten worse under Obama. "Both parties tend to get there and forget who they were and begin to talk differently than they do here," Pearce recently told a gathering of the Chaves County Republican Women in Roswell.

One big question is whether the GOP can capitalize on the free-floating hostility embodied by the anti-incumbent "tea party" movement to seize back control of Congress, four years after Democrats won power. Republicans need to win 40 House seats and 11 in the Senate -- which, for now, seems unlikely.

But plenty can change by November. Last spring, Democrats seemed well positioned to add Senate seats. Today, a Republican gain appears more probable, costing Democrats their 60-vote supermajority and ability to stop GOP filibusters -- though that could change again.

Democrats are counting on final passage of sweeping healthcare legislation, which appears on track for early this year, a stronger economy and rising employment to boost the party's prospects. In several Republican primaries -- for Texas governor and Senate races in California, Florida, Utah and other states -- unstinting conservatives are pitted against more moderate candidates who believe the party must hew closer to the center. A similar fight in November cost the GOP a once-solid New York congressional seat.

Obama was elected with the strongest showing by a Democratic presidential candidate in more than 30 years, thanks largely to a plunging economy and unhappiness with Bush.

There was talk of a long-term realignment after decades of conservative ascendance. But after battles over healthcare, a climate-change bill and hundreds of billions in spending to spur the economy, it is Democrats who face a backlash and Republicans who are campaigning on a promise of change.

The shift is evident here in southern New Mexico, where freshman Harry Teague -- the first Democrat to represent the region since 1980 -- is trying to fend off Pearce, who ran unsuccessfully for Senate in 2008. The race is expected to be one of the hardest-fought in the country; Republicans targeted Teague the minute he was elected.

Campaigning for the open seat, the Democrat used every chance to link his GOP rival to Bush. Now it is Teague who has to defend the president, his vote for Obama's economic stimulus bill and, especially, his support for legislation to fight global warming, which could have a serious effect on New Mexico's oil and gas industry.

"Now it's not just casting a vote against a politically unpopular president," said Ken Spain, a Republican Party spokesman. "Now you have to take a stand on some things. This is a district where the Obama-Pelosi agenda is vastly unpopular."

That remains to be seen. Las Cruces, with nearly 100,000 residents, is the biggest city in the district and a Democratic stronghold where House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco would feel comfortable.

Teague also boasts of bringing home federal dollars, including stimulus funds to help build an algae-based fuel refinery in the southwest corner of the state. The money, Teague said, will create hundreds of jobs in hard-pressed rural communities.

But many of the challenges facing Democrats nationwide -- including a likely drop in turnout among supporters and frustration within the party base -- are playing out here amid the desert and scrubland sprawling from Texas to Arizona.

"I'd be very surprised if we won any of our congressional races by the same margins we won in 2008," said Carter Bundy, a New Mexico political strategist for the labor union AFSCME. Democrats easily took all three House seats and a Senate race -- Pearce was crushed 61% to 39% -- thanks to Obama's big victory in the state. "No doubt 2010 will be a tougher year," Bundy said.

History suggests as much. Since World War II, the party of a new president has lost an average of 16 House seats in midterm elections, a handful of governorships and more than 200 state legislative seats. The parties have come out close to even in Senate races.

The problem for Democrats is evident in polling, which shows a precipitous slide in Obama's job approval rating, from a high of about 80% before he took office to 48% in the latest aggregation by pollster.com, a political website. The fortunes of the two major parties

often rise or fall with their leader in the White House: Bill Clinton, bruised by his failed effort to pass healthcare reform, had a 46% approval rating in 1994 when Republicans took over Congress. Bush, plagued by the unpopular war in Iraq, was at 38% when Democrats won control in 2006.

More worrisome for Democrats is the likelihood that many of their voters will stay home. Turnout always falls in nonpresidential election years, and that is why strategists closely gauge voter interest. Repeated surveys have found Republicans much more animated than Democrats; a Wall Street Journal/NBC poll in mid-December found that 56% of Republicans were "very interested," compared with 46% of Democrats.

That intensity gap was clear in New Mexico's 2nd District. For many Republicans, eager to send a message, November can't come too soon. Several cast half-hearted ballots for John McCain in 2008 and welcomed a chance to vote with conviction for the more reliably conservative Pearce.

"I think Americans made the biggest mistake they ever made when they elected Barack Obama," said Shirley Friend, 58, a Carlsbad schoolteacher who is angry over the skyrocketing debt, proposed Medicare Advantage cuts and what she considers Obama's too-frequent apologies for America overseas. "He's very charismatic and intelligent, but he's not a good president."

Several Democrats, by contrast, said they swallowed hard, their enthusiasm giving way to disillusionment, after Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan and declined to fight for a government-run healthcare plan. They expressed similar disappointment with Teague, whose voting record -- backing the first stimulus bill and climate-control legislation, opposing healthcare overhaul and a new round of stimulus spending -- reflect his challenge representing a district split between the left-leaning west and far more conservative east. (The latter, its air spiked with the sulfur smell of oil and gas, is known as "Little Texas" for its affinity with the Lone Star state.)

Barbara Villa, 40, is a Democrat from Artesia, her dusty black Plymouth still bearing a faded Kerry-Edwards sticker from 2004. She recognizes Teague's political fix. Still, the registered nurse said, "knowing the need for healthcare, it's really hard to cut much slack."

Teague, motoring the long stretch between small towns, said he considered issues on the merits; he opposed the healthcare bill because he doubts it will extend affordability. He supported the "cap-and-trade" bill to fight global warming after winning concessions to help small refiners and electrical co-ops.

"Making everybody happy in a district this big and diverse probably isn't going to happen," Teague said.

He professes not to worry about the shifting tide, but others do: the Democratic

congressional campaign arm has placed Teague in its incumbent-protection program, offering him special aid and attention. The party was caught napping by the Republican landslide of 1994.

The rule this time, said spokeswoman Jennifer Crider, "is no surprises."

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