



# The Early Outlook for 2008

BY STUART ROITHENBERG & NATHAN L. GONZALES

Republicans received some blunt and Donald Trump-like news from voters in November: You're fired! It wasn't that voters necessarily found the Democratic agenda more appealing or thought that House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid would be more effective leaders of Congress. Voters were simply unhappy with the war in Iraq and with President George W. Bush's leadership, and they expressed that desire for change by tossing out 30 Republicans from the House and six from the Senate.

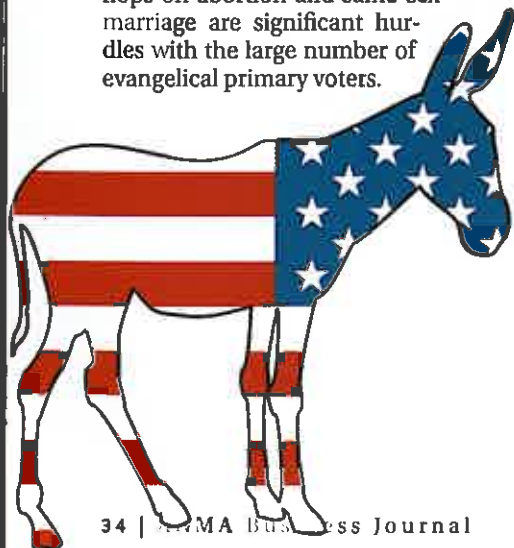
Surprisingly, most Democrats understood that the midterm results were more a rejection of the President and his party than a vote of confidence for Democrats. That explains why Democratic Congressional leaders emphasized cooperation and started by tackling problems that had more general appeal. While some liberals in the party would prefer more confrontation with the Bush administration, most senior Democrats say they want accomplishments rather than blood.

However, Democrats will also try to hold the Administration accountable for its actions in Iraq and for its ineptness after Hurricane Katrina, and Congressional hearings on administration policies are likely to renew partisan tensions. And partisan political pressures are likely to grow quickly because both parties have their eyes on the grand prize in 2008, the White House.

Without an incumbent or sitting vice president in the race, both parties have large fields, but clear tiers are developing. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (NY), Sen. Barack Obama (IL), and former Sen. John Edwards (NC) should be considered the top challengers for the Democratic nomination. All three candidates start with considerable campaign teams, fundraising ability and broad appeal, although, each has weaknesses.

Other Democratic candidates like Sen. Chris Dodd (CT), Gov. Bill Richardson (NM), Sen. Joe Biden (DE), former Gov. Tom Vilsack (IA) have scenarios to the nomination but their paths are more difficult. Richardson may be positioning himself for a vice-presidential slot along with former candidates Sen. Evan Bayh (IN), and former Gov. Mark Warner (VA), as well as Gov. Kathleen Sebelius (KS).

The GOP race starts with Arizona Sen. John McCain and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. In recent history, Republicans have nominated the previous runner-up candidate, which bodes well for McCain. His hawkish position on the Iraq war may be a liability in the general election, but not for the nomination. Romney is attractive, articulate, and a strong fundraiser. But his religion and alleged flip-flops on abortion and same-sex marriage are significant hurdles with the large number of evangelical primary voters.



There may be a window of opportunity for a true social conservative candidate, but Sen. Sam Brownback (KS), former Gov. Mike Huckabee (AR) and former Gov. Tommy Thompson (WI) start off well behind McCain and Romney in organization, fundraising, and name identification. Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani is a household name, but his multiple marriages and social issue positions put him at odds with the vast majority of GOP primary voters.

The Democratic nominee should have an advantage heading into the 2008 general election, since voters seem inclined for change and Republicans have held the White House since 2000.

Republicans face a difficult task in their bid to re-take the Senate. Democrats are defending only 12 seats compared to a whopping 21 seats on the GOP side. Colorado is currently the most vulnerable seat in the country, particularly with GOP Sen. Wayne Allard's decision not to seek reelection. Cong. Mark Udall (D) is the likely Democratic nominee and will run a strong race in a state that has been trending toward the Democrats. Sen. Susan Collins (R) in Maine is likely to face a stiff challenge from Cong. Tom Allen (D). The Democratic presidential nominee will run well in the state, while Collins will have to continue to carve out her independent profile.

Other initial Democrat targets include Sen. Norm Coleman (MN) and Sen. Gordon Smith (OR), as well as a much longer shot race against Sen. John Sununu (NH). If Sens. John Warner (VA) and Pete Domenici (NM) decide against running for another term, both states would be prime Democratic opportunities.

Democrats will spend plenty of money and effort defending Sen. Mary Landrieu (LA). But for now, the Republicans in Louisiana are focused on retaking the governorship this year. Sen. Tim Johnson's health also remains a serious concern. Even though Democrats are encouraged by his progress since his brain surgery, it seems difficult at this point to imagine him waging a run for reelection that was already scheduled for this cycle. An open seat would be competitive, although statewide Cong. Stephanie Herseth (D) would start as the favorite. Sen. Max Baucus (MT) always wins by narrow margins, but he isn't in any significant danger to this point.

The fight for the House is more volatile than the Senate, but the chances of Republicans regaining the majority in 2008 are not great. Many of the GOP losses last year were in Democratic-leaning districts in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New York. There weren't a slew of "accidental" winners that are immediately vulnerable, like in 1996.

The best Republican opportunities at the outset include Nick Lampson (TX 22), Tim Mahoney (FL 16), Nancy Boyda (KS 2), and Jerry McNerney (CA 11). Other targets could certainly come into play, particularly depending on the dynamic with the presidential ticket.

Democrats are drooling over a number of GOP incumbents with depressed margins of victory last cycle, but 2006 was an extraordinarily bad year for Republicans and was likely the best opportunity to defeat some sleeping Republicans who are wide awake now. Democrats are hoping that life in the minority will cause some GOP incumbents to retire and create new opportunities.

Two years is an eternity in politics, but at this point, Democrats are favored to retain their majority in the Senate, while Republicans could net a couple seats in the House but not nearly enough to retake the majority.

Anyone hoping that the tone of Washington would change over the next two years will be sorely disappointed. Both parties are firmly determined to win the White House and two continuous years of campaigning will only increase the bitterness and divisiveness in the nation's capital. □

