



BOTH PARTIES HOPE TO CONTROL CONGRESS IN TIGHT MIDTERM ELECTION

November 6, 2006

Democrats and Republicans are spending lots of money and energy hoping to be the party that controls the House of Representatives and Senate come Nov. 8.

While the Republican Party currently holds the majority in both the House and Senate, some political experts believe that the Democrats could win big Nov. 7, taking control of both legislative houses.

The Democrats last held both legislative bodies following the presidential election of 1992, but lost it just two years later.

This midterm election, voters will determine all 435 seats in the House and about one-third, or 33 seats, in the Senate. Democrats need to gain 15 seats to win a majority in the House and six in the Senate.

Key races and key issues

The outcome on Election Day will depend on several key races.

Over 40 congressional races in the House look to be competitive. In the Senate, three races are especially close: Tennessee, Missouri and Virginia.

Key issues in this midterm election include President Bush's approval ratings, the Iraq war, and whether to allow gay marriage and federally funded stem cell research.

According to a recent CBS News/New York Times poll, President Bush's approval rating is 34 percent, and some Republican candidates from more moderate states such as Maryland and Rhode Island have tried to distance themselves from the White House.

In more conservative states, Republicans are highlighting social issues such as stem cell research, abortion and gay marriage to bring supporters to the polls on Election Day.

"At the end of the day it's these base voters who turn out in these midterm elections and who make the difference in these races," Jim VandeHei, political correspondent for The Washington Post, told the NewsHour.

Midterm elections typically have a lower voter turnout than presidential elections.

Voter turnout

In the last 20 years, the percentage of eligible voters who exercised their right to vote in midterm elections has not risen above 40 percent, the Christian Science Monitor reported.

In the 2002 midterm elections voter turnout was 39.5 percent. In contrast, 60.3 percent of eligible voters went to the polls during the 2004 presidential election.

Democrats, on the other hand, are hoping that increased dissatisfaction with the Iraq war will bring out their voters.

"This year they've got the Iraq war that's got their Democratic base so fired up," VandeHei said.

Party control

If the Democrats do win back either the House or Senate, they will break the current one-party rule of the GOP leading the House, Senate and presidency.

One-party control of the White House and Congress is rare. Since 1969, it has occurred for only 10 years.

When different parties control the executive and legislative branches, there can be political gridlock, but it can also pave the way to compromise.

"Although compromise does not guarantee sound or successful policy-making, it does draw both parties to the center and produce bipartisan buy-in. It's no coincidence that divided governments produced the 1986 tax reform and the 1996 welfare reform, the great reforms of their respective eras," Jonathan Rauch wrote in an editorial for the National Journal.

If the Democrats gain the majority in either house, they also gain leadership control of the many committees that shape legislation and law.

Democratic leaders say they would use that control to scrutinize Republican policies.

"This Congress has been derelict in providing oversight. We need to do our job to restore checks and balances," Representative Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., told MSNBC.

Potential areas of investigation include Iraq reconstruction, Hurricane Katrina and homeland security, according to Representative Henry Waxman, D-Calif., who could lead the House Government Reform Committee.

"In all three of these areas, we see the same mistakes: big monopoly contracts, no bidding, no competition. So, there are a lot of abuses," he said.

Republicans counter that Democratic control would be dangerous, especially in regard to U.S. Iraq policy.

"The only way we can fail is if we leave before the job is done. And that's exactly what the Democrats want to do," President Bush said while campaigning in Montana last week.

Getting out the vote

With so many close races, those who make the effort to go to the polls are the deciding factor.

Both parties are calling potential voters, and going door to door to recruit residents and eliminate obstacles that might prevent them voting, like a ride to polling stations.

One group that could have a big impact on the midterm election is young voters.

According to a poll released by Harvard last week, 32 percent of 18-to-24 year olds said they "definitely" plan to vote this time.

If they do, this would be the highest youth turnout for a midterm election since 18 year olds were given the vote following a constitutional amendment in 1971.

"Younger voters could make the difference in campaigns across the country," Jeanne Shaheen, director of Harvard's Institute of Politics, which conducted the poll, told Reuters.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions