

REPUBLICAN MAIN STREET PARTNERSHIP



August 2010

Generic Congressional Ballot Survey

A recent survey released by Rasmussen Reports shows Republican candidates now holding a 10-point lead over Democrats on the generic congressional ballot -- the widest gap between the two parties in several weeks. 46% of likely voters would vote for their district's Republican congressional candidate, while 36% would opt for the Democratic opponent. 86% of Republicans back their party's candidate, while 74% of Democrats support the candidate of their party. Voters not affiliated with either party prefer the Republican candidate by a 44% to 23% margin.

On the Rasmussen survey, Republicans have led on the generic ballot since mid-June 2009, and this lead hasn't fallen below five points since the beginning of December. Three times this year, Republicans have had a 10 point lead. However, the results were much different during the last two election cycles when Democrats regularly had large advantages.

When President Obama was inaugurated in January 2009, Democrats enjoyed a seven-point advantage on the generic ballot. The two parties were very close through the spring of 2009, but in June, around the time Democrats began their campaign for health care reform, Republicans pulled ahead. Republican candidates started 2010 ahead by nine points. Since the first of the year, Republicans have earned between 43% and 47% of the vote, while Democratic support has ranged from 35% to 39%.

2010 Outlook for House Races

According to the Rothenberg Political Report the national political environment shows no sign of changing between now and November, a bad sign for Democrats. They note that "national polls generally continue to show President Barack Obama's job approval ranging from the mid-40s to the low 50s, and voters are strongly inclined to deliver another message of change." Rothenberg also points out the shifting trend in the generic ballot, and goes on to state that "too many Democratic candidates are well under 50% in ballot tests, and party strategists are worried about their ability to turn out Obama voters in the midterm elections. Maybe more important, independent and swing voters are turning to GOP candidates."

According to Rothenberg's ratings, there are 23 Democratic seats at least tilting toward the GOP, with just two Republican seats going in the Democrats' direction. The large number of Democratic toss-ups and leans show why Democratic control of the House after November is

very much in doubt. Rothenberg continues to believe that “substantial Republican gains are inevitable” and they recently increased their estimate of likely GOP gains from 25-30 seats to 28-33 seats. However, they note that considerably larger Republican gains in excess of 39 seats are quite possible.

The Importance of State Legislative Races in 2010 and Beyond

Tim Storey, writing for Larry Sabato’s Crystal Ball, presents interesting data showing the importance of state legislative seats in 2010. He notes that “elections for the thousands of state legislative seats that determine partisan control of states are typically provincial battles drawing relatively little attention from national media. These legislative elections are often called hidden elections. However, the spotlight this November will spill over to these down-ballot races because redistricting is around the corner, so the results in hundreds of races in the hinterlands could have long term implications for partisan control of Washington.” Storey indicates that historic trends and political signs point to a Republican year in state legislative races this fall and that could spell trouble for Democrats in Washington for years to come.

Storey points out that if Republicans fare well in legislative elections as it appears they might, combined with likely GOP gains in many of the 37 gubernatorial races this fall, they will have a decided advantage when the redrawing of congressional districts starts early next year. The 2011 redistricting could be the first time since the era of modern redistricting began in the 1980s that Republicans have the redistricting edge in the states, and it could be substantial. If the Fall election results in large Republican gains, it could give the GOP sole redistricting authority in the drawing of more than 160 U.S. House districts—nearly six times more than their Democratic counterparts.

Storey indicates that several historic trends point to this being a GOP year. Since 1900, there have been 27 elections held in the presidential mid-term year. In all but two of those mid-term elections, the party in the White House lost seats in state legislatures. The only exceptions were in 1934 and 2002. In 1934, during one of the lowest points of the great depression, Democrats campaigned on Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and gained over 1100 legislative seats nationwide in FDR’s first mid-term election. In 2002, Republicans rode a groundswell of support for President George W. Bush in the wake of the September 11th attacks to pick up 177 state legislative seats. However, in the other 25 mid-term elections, the party of the president lost an average 495 legislative seats. Mid-term losses have been mitigated in recent decades since modern redistricting took hold, but the trend is still very consistent. This trend is not good news for Democratic legislative candidates running for the first time since 2000 with a Democrat in the White House.

Another trend that works in favor of the GOP is the three-in-a-row syndrome. Democrats have increased their legislative numbers in each of the past three election cycles with their biggest surge being in 2006 when they added 322 seats. Neither party has netted seats in four consecutive elections since Democrats capped off a string of winning four elections in a row in 1936.

ABC Poll on Importance of Independents

A recent ABC News poll shows that independents are not only important, they're ascendant. In their survey, 40% of Americans identified themselves as independents, among the most in 29 years of ABC/Post polls. The past year has been one of the few periods in which the number of independents has surpassed both Democratic (now 31%) and Republican (24%) self-identification.

Overall, registered voters divide almost exactly evenly in their party preference for House candidates 47% for the Republican candidate in their congressional district, 46% for the Democrat. It's 49-45% among those most likely to vote. Among independents, it's 47% for the Republican candidate, 40% for the Democrat and among independents who say they're likely to vote, it's a wide 53-36% advantage for Republican candidates.

Additional Political Comments

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, in a recent interview on Meet the Press, admitted that Republicans could win back the House in the fall. He indicated that "I think there's no doubt there are enough seats in play that could cause Republicans to gain control.

The Cook Political Report identifies 64 Democratic-held seats as either "Lean" or "Toss-up" races, and points out that Republicans would need to win a majority of them (39) to win control of the House.

According to MSNBC's First Read, "there are four reasons why the House is up for grabs: 1. According to history, the GOP stands to pick up seats; 2. Republicans enjoy a significant enthusiasm advantage; 3. Democrats are losing the independent vote; and 4. Much of the House battleground will play in white/rural districts, where Obama isn't performing well."

But MSNBC also lists another four reasons why the GOP won't win back the House: "1. Unlike in '94, the Republican Party has a fav/unfav score that's no better (and sometimes even worse) than the Dem Party's; 2. Unlike in '94, the GOP isn't necessarily running on new ideas or even with many new faces; 3. the National Republican Congressional Committee has a HUGE financial disadvantage compared with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the RNC's political/fundraising troubles won't be able to make up the difference; and 4. Winning 39 seats is a tall order. After all, when Democrats won back the House in 2006 -- during the height of violence in Iraq and after Hurricane Katrina -- they picked up 30 House seats. The GOP will need almost 10 more than that. One thing that's truly amazing about this cycle, historically: The fact we're headed for a third-straight cycle where more than 20 seats change hands."

E. J. Dionne Jr., writing in The Washington Post, asserts that "if the midterm elections were held now, the Republicans would probably take control of the House of Representatives." He notes that independent voters are turning on the Democrats. Democratic House candidates received a 51% to 43% advantage over Republicans in 2008. Now, polls show independents tilting Republican by substantial margins.