



PRESS-REGISTER

McCain and Obama could both help Alabama congressional candidates

Sunday, November 02, 2008

By BRIAN LYMAN

Capital Bureau

MONTGOMERY - Alabama will probably go for John McCain in Tuesday's presidential election, observers say, but Barack Obama's presence on the ballot might help Democrats in three competitive congressional races.

Reflecting the unusual dynamics of the national race this year, experts say both candidates could have coattails for down-ballot nominees. Observers say McCain's likely landslide in Alabama will help Republicans, but that increased registration among Democratic-leaning black voters should aid Democrats on the ticket. A SurveyUSA poll published Oct. 29 showed McCain leading in Alabama 61 percent to 39 percent.

"In a presidential election, Republican voters are going to come out and vote anyway," said Bruce Oppenheimer, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University.

"Even if not enthused, they're going to come out and vote.

"(But) there's a clear feeling nationally that ironically, Obama may be helping (Democratic) candidates," even if Obama loses the state to McCain, Oppenheimer said.

In north Alabama's 5th Congressional District, Democrat Bud Cramer is retiring. State Sen. Parker Griffith, D-Huntsville, is squaring off against Republican Wayne Parker.

Meanwhile, Democrat Bobby Bright, the mayor of Montgomery, is running neck-and-neck with Republican state Rep. Jay Love of Montgomery to replace retiring U.S. Rep. Terry Everett, a Republican, in the 2nd Congressional District, a GOP stronghold since 1964.

Montgomery attorney Joshua Segall, a Democrat, is also mounting a campaign against U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Anniston, in east Alabama's 3rd Congressional District.

Republicans nationally are expecting to lose seats in Congress this year, but Jim Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Buffalo in New York and an expert on election trends, said a 60 percent McCain victory in Alabama could be worth up to 4 percentage points in competitive districts.

"If a (national) candidate is very popular in the district, that brings out voters, and what we know from national data is that voters brought out vote a straight ticket," he said.

But Democrats also have trends working their way. Black Alabamians have accounted for two-thirds of all new voter registrations in the state since 2004, and their vote is expected to go to Obama by large margins. That could prove equally effective in some of the close congressional races in the state.

David Lanoue, a political science professor at the University of Alabama, said Obama's popularity could

allow state Democrats to buck the GOP trend.

"The question is whether the (result) is caused by the candidate or by national trends," he said. "One place to make the coattails argument is if the African-American vote increases significantly, and, on that basis, Bobby Bright wins, you could say that is a candidate-effect rather than the effect of national trends."

Still, Robert Smith, a political science professor at San Francisco State University, said some of those voters might vote for Obama but nobody else on the ballot.

"It could have that effect," he said. "I would suspect Obama's coattails could be attenuated."

Alabama has often bucked national campaign trends.

In the 1964 presidential election, Democrat Lyndon Johnson won in a national landslide and brought in a Democratic Congress that allowed him to enact the programs of the Great Society. But reacting to Johnson's support of the Civil Rights Act, Alabama gave 70 percent of its vote to Republican Barry Goldwater and elected five Republicans in the state's then eight congressional districts.

In 1996, President Clinton won a nationwide landslide, but lost the state to Republican nominee Bob Dole. Republicans picked up two open House seats that year and elected Alabama Attorney General Jeff Sessions to the seat held by retiring U.S. Sen. Howell Heflin, a Democrat.

This year, Republican congressional candidates such as Love have aggressively attempted to tie their opponents to Obama and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, while Democratic candidates like Bright and Griffith have downplayed party affiliation.

"That's something Republicans have been doing here for ages," Lanoue said. "It seems like every time a Democrat has any strength they get hit with comparisons to Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi and John Kerry. So it's nothing new."

©2008 Mobile

© 2008 al.com All Rights Reserved.