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## Democrats Hope For Historic Gains In Congressional Elections

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Much of the popular attention in the 2008 election remains on the presidential contest, but Washington insiders and pundits are paying just as much attention to the Congressional races, where Democrats are trying to reach a filibuster-proof majority of 60 in the Senate and achieve the historically-difficult task of gaining double-digit seats in the House for the second election in a row.

Most experts identify this election as taking place in a Democratic year, with voters turning against the party of an unpopular president. However, concerns of "one-party rule" and historically high rates of incumbency could aid Republicans in congressional races.

James Campbell, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at Buffalo, predicts big gains for House Democrats.

"Certainly this is a very pro-democratic year, a very bad year for Republicans," he said.

Campbell said he expects House Democrats to pick up around 15 seats, predicting gains in the "mid-teens."

However, the high rates of incumbency - over 90 percent - that are reflected in congressional races could help Republicans, Campbell said. Additionally, the significant gains in 2006, when the Republican Party lost a stunning 30 seats in the mid-term election, could temper possible gains in 2008.

"The Democrats made a lot of gains in 2006 and have already taken a number of the easy seats," Campbell said.

Top strategists for the Republican and Democratic parties agree that 2008 will be a bad year for Republicans running for Congress, with the GOP likely to lose ground in the House of Representatives for the second consecutive election.

Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., a former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, and Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, both said that Republicans are likely to lose at least 10 more seats in the House.

Currently, Republicans have 199 seats to the Democrats' 235. Losing 10 seats would bring them down to 189 and push the Democrats up to 245. This would represent a net loss of 43 seats since 2004.

That puts Democrats in the nearly unprecedented position of expanding their majority after having ridden a wave election to power in 2006, Van Hollen said.

"Historically the party that wins a lot of seats tends to lose seats in the following election," he said, describing it as the "wave receding."

Although cushioning their majority in the House is significant, perhaps the most important goal for Democrats in the legislative branch is reaching the "magic number" of 60 in the Senate, providing a filibuster-proof majority. Most experts predict that the Democrats will come close to the 10-seat edge but ultimately fall short.

Although he said, "It's certainly a possibility," Campbell noted, "Almost everything has to fall right." Instead, he expects gains of around 6 or 7 seats.

Still, getting close to that number might be good enough for Democrats, Fritz Wenzel of the Zogby Polling Institute suggested, due to a few liberal Republicans in the Senate.

"I don't think they have to reach the magic number of 60," he said. "There are 2 or 3 Republicans that are more liberal, frankly, than some of the Democrats."

While it is a "possibility" that Democrats will reach 60, it is "probably unlikely," he said.

The financial crisis has been especially hard on Republicans seeking re-election, a concern evident earlier in the month when it took two attempts for the House to pass a \$700 billion financial rescue package. The controversy surrounding the passage of the financial rescue packages could be reflected at the polls.

Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., commented on the difficult position in a hearing in mid-October.

"I took two tough votes for this rescue bill and voted 'yes' and it may have endangered my career," he said. "I did it because I was worried about the people in my district."

"But they are legitimately angry that people seem to sit here, hearing after hearing, [saying] 'well it wasn't my responsibility,'" he continued. "They're furious."

However, Wenzel found that in Ohio, Democrats were re-gaining the

advantage over Republicans even prior to the financial crisis.

Still, in "the last polling we did after financial crisis had hit the front pages, we found that Democratic candidates for congress were going to fare better than their Republican candidates," he told RTTNews.

Meanwhile, one Arizona senator, Republican John McCain, has been warning against allowing Democrats to bolster their majority in the House and Senate, especially with the apparently strong possibility of a Democratic president. McCain has used this notion of one-party rule to boost his own candidacy as the countdown to election continues.

"Even with our troops engaged in two wars, and with a force in need of rebuilding, we're getting a glimpse of what one-party rule would look like under Obama, Pelosi, and Reid," McCain said Wednesday. "Apparently it starts with lowering our defenses and raising our taxes."

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