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POLITICS: When Campaigns Are Cakewalks

California primary voters only just selected their nominees for the state's 53 House seats on March 5. But there's not much reason for suspense during the eight months of campaigning that lie ahead. Insiders in both parties agree that in at least 52 of the state's contests—with the possible exception of the district where Democratic Rep. Gary Condit was denied renomination—there are clear favorites headed for a slam-dunk win on Election Day.

The same can be said for Texas, which held primaries for its 32 House races on March 12. Democrats talk up their prospects for winning an open seat in the Dallas area and for defeating Republican Rep. Henry Bonilla. Republicans suggest that perhaps one Democratic incumbent in a GOP-leaning district somewhere in the state could encounter stormy waters. More likely, however, the November results are already a done deal.

On March 19, Illinois voters will go to the polls. In all probability, the expected winners will be home free in 18 of the state's 19 districts. The sole exception will be downstate, where redistricting has forced two incumbents—Democratic Rep. David Phelps and Republican Rep. John M. Shimkus—to run against each other in November. Even in that case, however, leaders of both parties agree that the new district favors Shimkus.

That's 104 districts, with a net of perhaps three serious contests in November. Even the Communist Party, during its heyday in the former Soviet Union, often faced more uncertainty than that.

The early primary results illustrate a powerful factor that has overtaken House elections, with little public attention: A historically tiny share of seats is truly in play. This fall, only a couple of dozen House districts nationwide will feature real campaigns in which voters will have some reason to believe that they actually matter on November 5.

And this is a time when it actually does matter which party controls each House seat. With the Republicans' majority at 222–211—and with one independent usually loyal to the Republicans, the other to the Democrats—a net switch of only six seats would give the Democrats the reins.

This will be the fourth consecutive campaign in which Democrats have contended that a House takeover is within their grasp. (They have narrowed the partisan gap in each of the three elections following the Republicans' 52-seat gain in 1994.) But the truth is that the limited number of competitive seats this year means the Democrats have few opportunities to upset the balance of power. "This is a good thing for the majority party," said Rep. Jim McCrery of Louisiana, a vice chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

McCrery predicted that this trend will continue for the remainder of this

decade—"barring a cataclysm"—and that one significant consequence will be that neither party will hold a House majority of more than 235 seats. That would be a major historical shift. From 1959 to 1994, Democrats ran the House with never fewer than 242 seats.

Howard Wolfson, executive director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said that the smaller playing field of House seats has mirrored the nation's closely divided politics of the past decade.

"We are only battling for seats within the 40-yard line," he said. "Competitive House races are becoming like Senate races in their sophistication and media costs."

Defining what is a competitive seat can generate some disagreement among political scientists. Paul Herrnson, director of the center for American politics and citizenship at the University of Maryland (College Park), counts the contests where the winner won less than 60 percent of the two-party vote. Since 1982, his results show, the smallest share of House contests deemed competitive was in 1988, with 21 percent, and the largest was in 1994, with 43 percent. Gary Jacobson at the University of California (San Diego) counts the contests where the winner received less than 55 percent of the vote. He agrees with Herrnson on the most-volatile and least-volatile years since 1982. (See chart, below.) The 1950s, '60s, and '70s generally were more competitive than the period since 1980 has been, according to Jacobson's survey.

A year ago, experts predicted that the number of competitive races would go up in 2002, mainly because they assumed that redistricting would shake up existing boundaries and force many incumbents to meet new voters. Both Herrnson and Jacobson document a disproportionately larger number of competitive contests in 1982 and 1992, following the two previous redistrictings. For instance, in 1992, there were more than 80 competitive contests, 16 in California alone.

But things haven't turned out that way this time. Instead, as has been evident in California, Texas, and Illinois, redistricting has generally become an incumbent-protection device. With both parties striving to protect their current seats, sophisticated computer software has been used to help draw safer districts for incumbents by including as many voters of their party as politically feasible.

"Most states dodged partisan redistricting plans, and most members got seats that are marginally better" for them, said Vic Fazio, a partner at Clark and Weinstock Inc., who served 10 terms as a House Democrat from California and was a party leader before he retired in 1998. Although Fazio told an audience in the early 1990s that the quality of members' representation benefited from close elections back home, he said in a recent interview that constant, intensive campaigns are a "stretching and debilitating experience that can be tough to live with."

Money is another factor that influences the number of competitive races.

"Campaigning has changed in recent years," Herrnson said.

"The costs are higher, and the parties and interest groups are distributing more resources to the closest races. When that happens, there is less opportunity for additional close races."

Michael J. Malbin, executive director of the Washington-based Campaign Finance Institute and co-author of the biennial publication Vital Statistics on Congress, has found that the median sum raised by nonincumbent House candidates grew from \$23,956 in 1991, to \$55,191 in

1995, to \$159,375 in 1999. "Challengers in close races are raising early a bigger portion of a bigger pie," he said. But the number of challengers raising big bucks in each election has dropped. Malbin found that only 48 nonincumbent candidates for the House raised at least \$150,000 last year, compared with 101 candidates who raised that much two years earlier.

Assuming current expectations and historical patterns, a relatively small number of competitive seats will be in play for the upcoming five House elections, until the next redistricting is complete in 2012. "This will hold until there is a major shock to the system," Jacobson said. "You don't have competitive elections unless either party sees [national] issues as strongly on its side."

Some observers caution that a tidal wave such as the 1994 upheaval can occur with little advance notice. Likewise, there were huge shake-ups in the House in 1964 and 1974 because of national factors (Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign sweep and Watergate, respectively), even though the previous election in each case had been comparatively calm.

In recent elections, the most-competitive House races have taken shape relatively late, compared with high-profile Senate contests in which candidates may begin jousting two years before voters go to the polls. This trend has been accentuated in this cycle because of redistricting, which had not been finished for about half of the House districts by the end of last year, and which remains unresolved in several key states, including Florida and New York.

Nevertheless, the two parties have begun their rhetorical sparring over the prospects for House control, in an attempt to frame this fall's campaign—and to encourage prospective candidates and contributors.

GOP strategists contend that their party has been so successful in redistricting that Democrats will have virtually no chance in November to win the 218 seats needed for a majority. Republicans are clinging to the long-standing prediction of NRCC Chairman Tom Davis of Virginia that they will gain eight to 10 seats in redistricting. But that projection assumes that GOP candidates will win at least a half-dozen new or competitive seats that now appear to be toss-ups.

Democratic leaders, for their part, have contended that the nationwide results of redistricting will be a wash. "The net result of redistricting is parity," proclaimed Democratic National Committee Chairman Terence R. McAuliffe in early March. But this conclusion is based on district lines and candidates that don't yet exist in several cases.

Still, as top party strategists—including lawmakers and senior aides—have surveyed the current landscape of 435 House districts, they have reached similar conclusions about the shape of the fall campaign. Both sides currently project that the battle will be competitive in approximately 40 districts, but they expect that the total will inevitably drop by October, to perhaps as few as 25 districts. In these contests that will determine which party controls the House, spending will be exorbitant—and the rhetorical charges and countercharges will be at least as excessive. Meanwhile, more than 400 prospective House members of the 108th Congress, which will convene next January, will have little cause for concern about their own election.

Within this framework, each party points to some advantages. House Democrats note the success of their incumbents in the past three elections. Since 1994, they have lost only six members, while Republicans have lost 27.

Rep. Nita M. Lowey of New York, who chairs the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, attributed the GOP's increased vulnerability to the "out-of-step Republican leadership" that forces its members to cast tough votes. She predicts that pattern will hold this year, with votes on issues such as Social Security, the budget deficit, patients' rights legislation, and the proposed rollback of the corporate alternative minimum tax. Wolfson, the DCCC executive director, called last fall's House vote on the arcane AMT "potentially as devastating as the \$270 billion Medicare-cuts vote" that was a key issue in the 1996 campaign—a claim that Republicans dismiss.

House Democratic Caucus Chairman Martin Frost of Texas added that Republicans also have suffered in recent elections because more of their members have retired, forcing the party to defend more open seats. Eighteen House Republicans are not seeking another term this year, but House Democratic leaders have held their own retirements to 10, a factor that Frost said may be "the most remarkable feature" of this year's campaign.

Republicans, meanwhile, are counting on Bush's high approval ratings to provide a campaign boost, even though Presidents are often a drag on their party's congressional candidates during midterm elections. "When the President comes into a tight race in the final two weeks, that helps at the margin," McCrery said. "We will have that. The Democrats won't." Bush's recent decision to impose tariffs on steel imports, which could help several House Republicans in potentially vulnerable districts that have suffered job losses in steel mills, is the type of presidential action that could bolster the party's prospects.

GOP insiders also contend that Democrats are falling short in recruiting top-notch candidates in many districts. A prime example is in the usually competitive district of Rep. John Hostettler, R-Ind. Although Indiana Democrats tweaked the district to their benefit in redistricting last fall, the party's three prime prospects all decided not to run against Hostettler.

Republicans also suggest that Democrats have been struggling to identify issues on which to launch campaign attacks in the post-September 11 political environment. "A year ago, it was high gasoline prices. Then, they turned to airport security last fall. Now, the recession is over. None of these issues gives them anything," said a GOP strategist, who added that Republican candidates can point to an "issue matrix of national security, homeland security, and economic security."

Whatever the election outcome, the prospect of another decade with only a few House seats in play during each election is a significant development. Some partisans say it's not necessarily a bad thing.

"Competitive seats will be fiercely fought," said Ed Brookover, a former campaign director for the NRCC who recently took over as chairman of political practice at the consulting firm of Greener and Hook. "This is a business of competing ideas," added David Plouffe, a former executive director of the DCCC and now a partner at Axelrod Associates, a political consulting firm. "There will be pitched,

24-month battles.... That's healthy for the country."

As public opinion polls show that Americans are relatively upbeat and have a positive view of Washington, House incumbents and their operatives in both parties can maintain their sanguine outlook. But it hasn't been so long since the nation was fed up with a House that was beset by internal problems, fiscal mismanagement, gridlock with the White House, and personal scandals in both parties. Some principal figures from those times—such as Democratic Reps. Tony Coelho and Tom Foley and Republican Reps. Newt Gingrich and Bob Michel—are living reminders of Capitol Hill's volatility and the shifts in the national political tide. Sometimes, even a "safe seat" doesn't offer much protection to a lawmaker or a party.

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