

# DESPERATELY SEEKING THE SENATE

## Centrist Democrats vie for open seats

By David Moberg



**T**he battle for the White House overshadows all politics this fall, but in the U.S. Senate Democrats have a shot at overturning the 51-to-48-seat Republican majority. Given the politics of the contenders, Democratic control would not bring a dramatic ideological shift, but it would give Democrats control of committees—providing a platform for legislative initiatives and investigations that could prove critical if Bush wins.

At first glance, the Democrats face daunting prospects. They are defending 19 seats, the Republicans only 15.

In five Southern states incumbent Democrats are retiring, and all but one of the tightest races are in states where Bush has a clear edge. That one exception—Florida—is a presidential battleground, where energetic voter registration, Kerry campaign initiatives and independent expenditures could boost Democratic chances.

But otherwise, only a few Democratic candidates in these hotly contested races are likely to be helped significantly by a strong Kerry campaign. Organized labor, other progressive movements, and independent efforts for voter registration and turnout are also relatively weak in these key races.

Yet Republicans in several of these key states have flawed candidates or face deep divisions between conservative factions. Additionally, the feeble economy, growing doubts about the war in Iraq, and voters' predisposition to trust Democrats more on issues such as healthcare and education all work to Democrats' advantage. If the GOP can make cultural issues like abortion and gay marriage

the central domestic issues in the fall elections, their advantage could grow, but many Democrats in these races also favor abortion restrictions and a constitutional gay-marriage ban.

### Win some, lose some

Democrats are certain to pick up at least one Republican seat in Illinois, where Barack Obama is routing right-winger Alan Keyes, who was recently attacked by his own party leaders for making "idiotic" and "extremist" remarks against gays in general and Vice President Cheney's lesbian daughter Mary in particular. But Republicans also are virtually certain to win the seat being vacated by Zell Miller, the Democrat in name only who mendaciously savaged Kerry at the Republican Convention.

Most incumbents are relatively safe, but there are some close races. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle is a slight favorite to retain his seat in South Dakota against Rep. John Thune, and liberal Washington Sen. Patty Murray is likely to turn back an attack by staunchly conservative Rep. George Nethercutt.

In Alaska, Democratic former Gov. Tony Knowles has a good chance of defeating Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who was appointed to the Senate seat by her father when he became governor. Yet both candidates support drilling for oil in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, putting Knowles at odds with his party and Kerry.

In Missouri, Pennsylvania and Ohio, Democratic challengers—respectively, State Treasurer Nancy Farmer, Rep. Joseph Hoeffel

and Rep. Eric Fingerhut—appear far less likely to upset incumbents Kit Bond, Arlen Specter and George Voinovich, despite dismal state economic conditions.

## The key races

Ultimately, the balance of power will come down to five to 12 key races, mainly for open seats where moderate to conservative Democrats face right-wing Republicans.

In Colorado, where Republican incumbent Ben Nighthorse Campbell is retiring, Attorney General Ken Salazar, an experienced politician from a Hispanic family with deep roots in rural Colorado, defeated a more progressive African-American educator in the Democratic primary. The Republican candidate is beer magnate and conservative political novice Peter Coors, whose family has long bankrolled far-right causes. In the primary Coors recruited new, moderate Republican voters to turn back a challenge by former Rep. Bob Schaffer, whose backers accused Coors of employing “pornographic” advertising for his beer and promoting “the radical homosexual agenda” because the Coors Brewing Company provides benefits to gay employees’ partners. (Coors himself supports a federal constitutional ban on same-sex marriage.) Republicans hold the edge in party affiliation, but the large bloc of independents and a gain in Democratic registrations have given new hope to the campaigns of both Kerry and Salazar (whose agenda resembles Kerry’s), especially with the state’s far right still squabbling. As Denver labor federation leader Leslie Moody says, “[Salazar] brings out a bunch of voters not otherwise enfranchised.”

In North Carolina, former Clinton Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles seems to have learned from his losing 2002 bid for Jesse Helms’ old seat and has adopted a mildly populist focus on jobs, healthcare and trade. With retiring Sen. John Edwards on the presidential ticket, the well-financed Bowles continues to have an advantage over the very conservative Rep. Richard Burr, who has run a lackluster campaign. Burr draws support from rural areas despite Bowles’ critique of his failure to fight for a tobacco farmer buyout; Bowles is strong in urban and high-tech centers.

With the Kerry campaign virtually abandoning next-door South Carolina, despite Edwards’ appeal there, State Education Superintendent and popular state Democratic politician Inez Tenenbaum is in a tough race against Rep. Jim DeMint. DeMint, a conservative free-trader and advocate of replacing the income tax with a national sales tax, may yet damage himself given a penchant for remarks like telling laid-off workers: “Stop whining about job losses.” Tenenbaum is running on a platform more protective of jobs against trade threats and outsourcing, but she is culturally conservative—supporting the war in Iraq, the death penalty, some restrictions on abortion and amending the constitution to ban gay marriage.

Democrats have a good chance of holding the Louisiana seat being vacated by conservative Democrat John Breaux, but the outcome will almost certainly be determined in a runoff after November. There also is a chance for Democrats to take the Oklahoma seat left open when Republican Don Nickles retired. Far right former Rep. Tom Coburn, who advocates the death penalty for “abortionists,” won an upset in a bitter Republican primary. Despite Bush’s almost guaranteed win there, Democratic state Rep. Brad Carson

entered the final two months only slightly behind. A moderate conservative by Oklahoma standards, Carson touts his National Rifle Association endorsement, his support for a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, his “Christian faith” and his distance from the Democratic Party and its national candidates.

Unlike most of the Senate swing states, the race in Florida—between Democratic former State Education Commissioner Betty Castor and Republican former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Mel Martinez—may be influenced by the presidential race. The Republican primary left the party wounded. It often appeared to be a fight over who was the most anti-gay, with Martinez

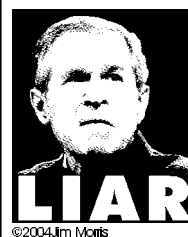
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attacking right-winger Bill McCollum as “anti-family” and a tool of the “radical homosexual lobby” for his support of hate crimes legislation and stem-cell research. Castor, who comes from central Florida but has statewide name recognition, has emphasized moderate policy positions on education and healthcare.

## Self-fulfilling failure?

Even if Democrats succeed at winning the Senate, it will not result in a long-term and coherent strategy to build a national party and will only slightly advance a progressive agenda. Both goals require much long-term effort, especially in the South, where defeat often has been self-fulfilling, says College of Charleston professor Jack Bass. Not only are large numbers of African-Americans still not registered or mobilized in the South, but only 20 percent of white working-class males vote, partly, Bass says, because “they don’t have anything to vote for.”

Building support for a strong populist economic policy could reduce the influence of the cultural and religious right and mobilize those missing voters, making a future battle for the Senate less dependent on a hodgepodge of campaigns defined by cultural conservatism. Until then, Democrats will have to scramble for victory any way they can get it. ■



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BY SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

## The Free World ... of Slums

Although Timothy Garton Ash is my political opponent, I've always admired his wealth of precise observations and found him a reliable source on the vicissitudes of post-Communist Eastern Europe. In his new book, *The*

*Free World: America, Europe and the Suprising Future of the West*, Ash applies his signature bitterly witty approach to the growing tensions between key Western European states and the United States. His *aperçus* about the relations among the United Kingdom, France and Germany recall the gentle irony of a novel of manners, giving a new twist to the old topic of "European trinity."

Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographic triad of Germany-France-England as expressing three existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness and English moderate pragmatism. In terms of political stances, this triad can be read as German conservatism, French radicalism and English liberalism. In

terms of a predominating social sphere, it is German culture versus French politics versus English economy. Ash observes that today this trinity has undergone a strange displacement: The French are preoccupied with culture (How to save their legacy from vulgar Americanization); the English focus on political dilemmas (Should they join the European Monetary Union?); the Germans worry about the sad inertia of their economy.

A desired goal might be a further shift: The English focused on culture (their cultural tolerance and lack of pretence could serve as an antidote to French arrogant elitism and German excessive seriousness). The French focused on economy (which, against all