

House Plants

Congressional races hardly competitive



www.ficus2000.com

By Rhodes Cook

In a presidential election year, no race is more intensely watched than the one for the White House itself. But this year, the closest contest may be for dominance at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, where a swing of less than 10 seats in the 435-member House of Representatives would shift control from the Republicans to the Democrats.

Currently, there are 222 Republicans, 211 Democrats and two independents in the House, the closest partisan division in nearly half a century.

Rhodes Cook is the author of a number of election-related books, including "America Votes," a biennial publication of electoral data. He also hosts the political website, www.rhodescook.com.

But the fact that the two parties are almost evenly matched does not mean that on a race-by-race basis the struggle for House control is highly competitive. Just ask the voters in central Pennsylvania, where in two districts, the chief opposition to congressional incumbents may come from a pair of ficus plants.

It is a puckish prank of sorts, orchestrated by Michael Moore, the anti-establishment impresario probably best known for his movie, *Roger and Me*. His ficus plants (or fig trees) are being promoted as opponents for a pair of Republican Congress members in the Pennsylvania countryside who do not have Democratic challengers. And while the leafy plants are not expected to make the ballot, they stand as a symbol of sorts for the lack of serious

competition for House seats in the vast majority of the country.

Altogether, no more than three to four dozen districts are being hotly contested this year, basically a mix of open seats and those won by incumbents with slim majorities in 1998.

This paucity of competition is hardly unique to the new millennium. The story was similar two years ago, when nearly five times as many House members were elected without major-party opposition (a total of 94) as were elected with less than 52% of the vote (a total of 19).

Put another way, barely 4% of the current House membership experienced highly competitive races in 1998,

while nearly 22% won seats that were not contested at all by the other party. It is a ratio one would more likely associate with a “banana republic” than one of the world’s largest democracies.

This remarkably large number of free rides may be almost as high this year. Just in the 15 congressional primaries held through the end of May, there were more than two dozen districts where one of the major parties did not field a candidate.

Even then, this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are scores and scores of other races that are functionally non-competitive. The incumbent may have an opponent, but it amounts to little more than a warm body on the ballot.

A few of these districts may produce a surprise in November, but in recent elections there have rarely been more than a small handful of upsets. In many districts, both parties are taking the attitude, why bother to field candidates at all?

The 94 elected without major-party opposition in 1998 was the highest number in 40 years, according to a compilation by Gregory L. Giroux of *Congressional Quarterly*. But a generation or two ago there was a ready excuse. The Democrats so clearly dominated congressional voting across the South that the Republicans routinely conceded dozens of seats there each election without a fight.

Nowadays, the Democrats and Republicans are competitive in virtually every state in the country. Yet in 1998, both parties conceded seats in whole-sale numbers. Democrats failed to field candidates in 55 districts, Republicans in 39.

Third-party candidates were on the ballot in some of the districts where only a Democratic or Republican candidate ran. But in practical terms, these members were uncontested.

Most of the uncontested districts in 1998 were in the South (60 of the 94); so many in fact, that close to half of the entire complement of House seats in the region went by default to one party or the other. In several southern states, the rate of non-competitiveness was much higher, led by Florida—the nation’s fourth-most populous state—where 18 of the 23 districts featured only one major-party candidate.

Yet while the South led the way in this dubious measurement of non-competitiveness, there was also a sizable number of unopposed House winners in every other region, including 9 in the Midwest, 12 in the Northeast, and a baker’s dozen in the West.

A major reason for the lack of much serious competition these days is money, or more specifically, the inability of all but a corporal’s guard of potential congressional candidates to raise the funds necessary to compete.

Candidates’ communication skills, support from their parties, and a knack for grass-roots organization are all well and good. But in an age of political consultants and media advertising, it is virtually impossible today for candidates to win a House seat on the cheap.

Hardly anywhere can a candidate be competitive without spending at least several hundred thousand dollars. Of the 40 House members who won their first term in November 1998, all but one spent in excess of \$400,000, and about half spent more than \$1 million.

The lone newcomer who did not have to spend at least \$400,000 in the last election, Democrat Joseph Crowley of New York, was essentially hand-picked by his predecessor, had no primary opposition, and was able to coast to victory in his heavily Democratic district.

Incumbents have played a hand in driving up the price of House seats by raising more and more money earlier in the election cycle. By the end of 1999, roughly 75 House incumbents had raised more than \$500,000 for an election that was still nearly a year away. By contrast, fewer than 10 challengers had raised that amount.

Almost as important as money in driving down the level of competition is the simple matter of geography. The national political map is not out of sync as it once was, when many House members were forced to face election on difficult terrain.

The number of safe seats is up; the number of politically marginal seats is down. In short, the competitive playing field has shrunk.

In the recent past, both parties often targeted seats that were held by one party but whose constituents regularly voted for presidential candidates of the other. In the 1990s, though, there was a growing alignment between presidential and congressional voting, with fewer easy targets anymore for either side.

Redistricting has played a major role in the increased congruency in the political map, especially in the South, where the creation of new black-majority districts in the 1990s ensured the Democrats several dozen safe seats but weakened the party’s base in a number of other districts where the minority vote was reduced.

Gone is the politically split South, which for years voted Republican for president but elected Democrats to the House. As recently as the beginning of the Clinton presidency, the breakdown of southern House seats was 85 Democratic to 52 Republican. Now, it is 82 Republican to 54 Democratic (with one independent). And the number of districts across the

South that split Republican for president, Democrat for House, has plummeted from roughly 75 in 1984 to hardly a dozen now.

Gone, too, are most of the Democratic House seats in the historically Republican Plains and Mountain states. Now, Democratic congressional beachheads in this vast sector of the country are literally few and far between.

Most of the movement to the Republicans came in 1994, when the GOP won control of the House for the first time in 40 years. Since then, the Democrats have been nibbling away at the Republican majority by winning seats in the Northeast and Pacific Coast states, in particular—bastions of support for Clinton during his presidential runs in the 1990s.

The result of this congressional realignment is that fewer than 50 districts are left that clearly support one party for Congress and the other party for president. Yet while the representatives of these districts may be considered political misfits, of sorts, they are hardly exposed pieces of deadwood.

Democrats who weathered the Republican tidal wave of 1994, and Republicans who withstood the Democratic countersurge of 1996 and 1998, by now can be considered survivors. They have learned to endure in tough terrain by accommodating themselves to their districts.

In many election years, recession or widespread ethics lapses—such as Watergate or the House banking scandal—can dramatically expand the number of incumbents at risk. But there has been no such powerful external force at play this year.

And it has been a long time since successful presidential candidates have exhibited the coattail pull necessary to elect a large cadre of their party's House candidates along with them.

Even as Clinton coasted to re-election in 1996, for instance, he drew a higher share of the district-by-district vote than only 27 victorious Democratic congressional candidates. Yet even that modest showing was better than 1992, when Clinton ran ahead of only four victorious House Democrats.

Part of Clinton's limited coattail pull was due to the fact that he never won the White House with a majority of the popular vote. Yet even Ronald Reagan's landslide re-election victory in 1984, with nearly 60% of the vote, was of limited value to Republican congressional candidates. Reagan ran ahead of 59 successful GOP House candidates that year but trailed 123 others, and Republicans remained a distinct minority in the House.

That was a far cry from the good old days of presidential coattails. When Dwight D. Eisenhower won an easy re-election in 1956, he ran ahead of 155 victorious House Republicans. And Lyndon B. Johnson's coattails were evident in 1964, as he outpaced 134 victorious Democratic congressional candidates, setting the stage for the Democrats' "Great Society" Congress.

But since then, the electorate has grown increasingly independent and has shown an obvious willingness to split their tickets. A result has been a clear disconnection between presidential and congressional voting that was not present a generation or two ago.

For many potential candidates not already wealthy, the attitude these days is, why bother? The price tag is high, the odds are long (98% of all House incumbents were re-elected in 1998), and the "reward" for winning is a seat in one of the nation's prime political combat zones.

The partisan rancor, where every session is potentially a "night of the long knives," has given many potential can-

didates second thoughts about fashioning a career in Washington. Once the goal of any ambitious young politician, Capitol Hill these days is viewed as a less desirable objective.

Still, the next election—that of 2002—is guaranteed to be more competitive in more districts than this one for a very simple reason—redistricting. The decennial head count of the nation's population that is taking place this year will be followed by the reapportionment of seats to the states, and the redrawing of lines within the states to reflect population changes.

Some states will gain seats, some will lose seats, and every state except those with a single district will have their congressional district boundaries redrawn.

It will be a time of guaranteed volatility. Virtually all incumbents will have to adjust to some new terrain that will reduce their normal advantage. A few may even find themselves paired against each other in the same district.

In the last "post-redistricting" election in 1992, 65 House members chose to retire, 24 were beaten in the general election and 19 lost in the primaries (the latter a record for the post-World War II years).

But as the saying goes, that was then, and this is now. This year there is a dearth of competition. The shift of a few seats could change partisan control of the "people's chamber" for only the second time since 1954. But in terms of broad-based competition, this year's congressional elections are shaping up as the calm before the storm—at least, what could be construed as a storm by today's listless standards. 