

Elections Near, Dueling With Dollars; Party Operatives Try To Influence Races

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John Lapp, a 35-year-old Democratic strategist in charge of spending \$60 million to defeat Republicans, had reason to feel aggressive. Internal party polls late last week showed 30 GOP House incumbents tied or behind. Armed with that information, Lapp approved a series of television ads attacking Rep. Jim Ryun, a Republican from a conservative corner of Kansas who suddenly looked a lot more vulnerable than before.

A few blocks away on Capitol Hill, Carl Forti, with a similar budget to protect the GOP majority, was playing defense. His own polls showed a growing number of House Republicans in serious trouble. Forti, 34, had little choice but to buy ads to protect suddenly at-risk Reps. Charles Bass (N.H.) and John R. "Randy" Kuhl Jr. (N.Y.).

Lapp and Forti make dozens of decisions like these every day, and the outcomes will only grow in importance during this final full week of the 2006 campaign. Betting right could well decide who controls the House after the Nov. 7 midterm elections, and by how many seats, according to strategists in both parties.

Forti and Lapp run the independent expenditure arms of their parties' campaign committees, the place where many of the negative ads that voters are seeing are financed, produced and strategically placed on television stations across the country. In the final days of the campaign, they will easily outspend the candidates themselves in many of the most competitive House races. They will decide the final images that many voters see in this campaign. Warning for the fainthearted: Most of the ads will be dark and accusatory.

One bad call could make or break a House race, officials in both parties said. There is no precise formula for determining the smartest choices. There are only polls, historical trends, anecdotal evidence and instinct, all of which can be flawed. Operatives in both parties described the process by which these decisions are made, in most cases on the condition that they not be quoted by name.

At the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, where Lapp works, officials are more confident than ever that they will gain a minimum of 18 seats, three more than they need for a majority, and possibly more than 40 if they catch a bunch of breaks in the remaining nine days. Expectations have evolved from simply winning a majority to setting the stage for a blowout.

The committee recently commissioned polls in almost 20 "bubble districts" that once looked difficult to win but now appear within reach. These include the open seat in Nevada's 2nd District and the one held by Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-Minn.). Lapp's team has polls showing Democrats close in all the races.

Over at the National Republican Congressional Committee, where Forti operates, officials said they see the situation as less bleak than they did a few weeks ago, immediately after the Mark Foley page scandal broke.

Based on polling, Republican strategists say a half-dozen seats, including open seats in Colorado, Arizona and Ohio, appear unwinnable. Six other races, including one for the seat held by Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), are looking dire but not hopeless.

Most worrisome, GOP strategists say, is that 20 or more additional Republican incumbents are essentially tied or holding very small leads -- a danger zone for a sitting member of Congress in a tough political environment. This has left Forti and colleagues in survival mode.

A look at recent expenditures by the NRCC reveals the wide range of seats Forti must find a way to win. In a two-day period last week, the committee paid for polls in 14 races. Ten of those surveys were in districts of Republican incumbents, including previously safe seats such as that of Rep. Mark Edward Souder in Indiana.

It is Forti's job to decide whom the NRCC can save.

Under campaign law, the independent organizations are prohibited from coordinating with candidates they assist. There are limits to the discussions Forti and Lapp can have with even their bosses, as well as with other staffers on campaign committees. This leaves both with enormous power.

Forti ran the NRCC's independent expenditure effort in the previous two election cycles. He maintains a spartan staff, relying on his own campaign know-how as well as the legal guidance of NRCC general counsel Don McGahn.

At the White House, such strategists as Karl Rove have boasted publicly that Republicans' superior program for turning out voters -- which exceeded expectations in 2002 and 2004 -- will work again to save them from defeat Nov. 7. But a senior Republican operative involved in party planning said the GOP's turnout operation can usually make a decisive difference only in races decided by about one percentage point. Moreover, the operative said, it is difficult to set up turnout operations during the homestretch of races that Republicans previously did not expect to be so competitive, such as Souder's. "It is easier to move financial resources than human resources," the operative said.

So Forti is moving the financial resources around to improve his odds, sometimes for reasons that are not obvious to outsiders. (He declined to comment on party strategy.)

The NRCC, for instance, is spending money to win the open seat vacated by Rep. Robert W. Ney (R-Ohio), who has been indicted, and to defend Rep. John N. Hostettler (Ind.), despite what polls and operatives suggest are fading prospects for victory in both races. "It forces them to spend money," said a GOP strategist familiar with endgame planning.

Most of the time, spending is a more straightforward investment in self-preservation. Republicans late last week started running ads to defend Bass and have already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to protect Rep. Richard W. Pombo (Calif.). Democrats have bought television time in both districts.

"If they go anywhere, we will just follow them in," the GOP strategist said. Republicans on Capitol Hill are more concerned about Pombo than Bass.

The calculations change by the day. Republicans had all but written off Rep. Don Sherwood (Pa.) a few weeks ago after Democrats ran ads highlighting allegations from his former mistress that he had tried to strangle her. But GOP polling now shows the race tightening after an appearance by President Bush increased to 70 percent from 50 percent the percentage of conservatives who said they were excited about turning out to vote for the incumbent. Democrats said their polls still show Sherwood being clobbered.

"Republicans are playing a game of whack-a-mole while we are expanding the number of races in play by the day," Lapp said.

Lapp -- who was picked for the job after a three-minute first-time meeting with DCCC Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.) in 2004 -- has slowly expanded the number of seats Democrats are targeting, but not as broadly and quickly as some strategists would like. Lapp runs a much larger operation than Forti; it includes a personal team of opposition researchers. He is called a "maniac, but in a good way," by Bill Burton, a longtime DCCC colleague.

Lapp, like Forti, lives on polling these days. He reviews a half-dozen new polls each day and can turn data into an on-air ad within 24 hours.

But there is more to smart spending than voter surveys.

In Washington's 5th District, Lapp is running ads hitting freshman Rep. Cathy McMorris despite the strong Republican tilt of the district. That's because ad time in the Spokane media market, which covers almost the entire district, is relatively inexpensive, allowing the DCCC to fund a week of ads for just over \$300,000. It is a cheap bet, even for a long shot.

But Lapp is not running ads against Rep. Jean Schmidt (Ohio) who, despite woeful reelection numbers, benefits from the high price of television time in the Cincinnati market. This decision could save Schmidt's job, strategists in both parties

say.

The DCCC is set to launch an ad against Rep. Ron Lewis in Kentucky's 2nd District with what one operative described as "guilt money," after committee officials played a major role in persuading state Rep. Mike Weaver to challenge the incumbent.

Lapp also plays mind games. Because both parties have a staff member who monitors potential ad buys, Lapp will spend time calling television stations to inquire about ad buys he never plans to make -- just to confuse or intimidate Republicans.

Most times, the calls are for real. Take Illinois' 6th District, where Iraq war veteran Tammy Duckworth (D) is running low on cash in her race against state Sen. Peter Roskam. The DCCC recently stepped in, raising its commitment to \$2.7 million in the costly Chicago media market in hopes of keeping her chances alive in the last week.

Howard Wolfson, who sat in Lapp's chair during the 2002 election cycle, said knowing where to spend and, as important, where not to spend is by far the most difficult part of the job.

"Where Republicans choose to defend and where Democrats choose to attack are critically important," he said.

Research database editor Derek Willis contributed to this report.

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