

Who Has Election Edge?

Democrats say they are well-positioned heading to November

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NASHVILLE - While state Republican leaders contend that their party has a chance of gaining control of the state House this fall, Democrats say it is more likely they will actually add Democratic seats to the current 53-46 majority.

The numerical lineup of races - and, at least arguably, this year's national political environment - would appear to favor Democrats.

Indeed, Alex Johnson, executive director of the Republican State Leadership Committee, said last week that winning control of the Tennessee House is unlikely this year and the GOP will be doing well "if we can hold our own or maybe pick up a couple of seats."

"It is no secret this is going to be a challenging year for Republicans," said Johnson, whose organization promotes Republican state legislative candidates nationwide. "We are going to be in a protection mode."

This year, the Republican State Leadership Committee has already given in Tennessee \$50,000 to House Republicans and \$25,000 to state Senate Republicans. In 2004, the group spent \$180,000 helping Tennessee GOP legislator causes.

The Democratic counterpart has not contributed directly to Tennessee campaigns yet, but Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee Executive Director Michael Davies did not rule out the possibility of that happening this year. Davies and Johnson spoke last week at a panel discussion at the

National Conference of State Legislators in Nashville.

Johnson's assessment of Tennessee House races is contrary to the assertions of state-level party officials.

"We disagree," said Chris Devaney, executive director of the Tennessee Republican Party. "The mood in Tennessee is not the same as it is nationally.

"We've done polls on this and you can see it's just not the same," he said. "Yes, we have some hurdles, but we have some opportunities here, too. We can gain some seats - enough for a majority."

Davies and state Democratic leaders are in agreement that the state House Democratic majority appears safe this year and may actually expand.

"We feel confident we'll increase our majority in the state House," said state Democratic Chairman Bob Tuke. "We, without question, outreached our opponents. They have dragged a number of retread candidates into rerun races. We have a slate full of self-motivated fresh faces."

The numbers do favor Democrats, who now have a five-seat majority.

All 99 House seats are up for election this year, but in 30 of those seats Democrats are running with no Republican opposition. In 25 seats, Republicans are running with no Democratic opponents.

A News Sentinel analysis of the remaining races - based on interviews with political operatives of both parties and review of past election data and campaign finance reports - indicates that Democrats are strongly favored in another 14 races, Republicans in nine.

Thus, it would appear that Democrats go into the campaign with 44 seats pretty much assured - just six shy of the 50 needed for a majority. Republicans begin with 34 seats - in effect, 10 seats behind at the starting point.

Of the remaining seats, eight appear to be leaning toward the Democratic nominee and another eight appear leaning toward the Republican. In such cases, the race is seen as close enough for the underdog candidate to turn things

around.

Another five races appear highly competitive and could go either way. Four of the five seats are now held by Republicans.

Under this scenario of the campaigns, Republicans would have to win all the tossup seats, all the Republican-leaning seats and three of the eight Democrat-leaning seats to gain the seats needed for a House majority.

In five of the Democrat-leaning races, the Republican candidate is the same person who lost in 2004. Devaney contends that, in these cases, the Republican has learned from his or her mistakes and is better positioned for victory in a rematch.

"We're doing some smarter things this year," he said.

Democrats, on the other hand, say that 2004 was a banner year for Republicans with President Bush heading their ticket and providing coattails for others of his party. This year, Bush's popularity has waned and Republicans have no equivalent top-of-the-ticket leader.

In contrast, some Democratic legislative candidates this year may enjoy a ride on Gov. Phil Bredesen's coattails, according to Michael Gant, who conducted a statewide poll this summer as director of the University of Tennessee Social Science Research Institute. Democrats endorse this view.

"We're obviously encouraged by having a popular governor with broad bipartisan support at the top of the ticket driving turnout," said Tuke.

Devaney discounts the prospect of Bredesen boosting Democratic legislator prospects, noting his efforts toward helping state Senate Democrats in 2004 failed and the chamber now has a Republican majority.

At the same time, he said, Republican legislative candidates may benefit from a referendum on amending the state constitution to ban same-sex marriage, Devaney said. The proposal will also be on the Nov. 7 ballot.

"I think that the protection of traditional marriage amendment is going to bring out more

conservatives to vote. More conservatives vote Republican than Democrat," Devaney said.

Democrats say the proposed constitutional amendment will have little impact, since it is supported by most Democratic candidates and is expected to win approval by lopsided margins statewide.