



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 11, 2010

Democrat Retirements a Trend or a Tsunami?

The announcements by Democrat Senators Chris Dodd (Conn.) and Byron Dorgan (N.D.) last week that they will not be running for reelection in 2010 raised both concerns by Democrats and hopes of Republicans.

Senator Dodd's announcement has been examined thoroughly [elsewhere](#) on this site, but Senator Dorgan's announcement was an [unexpected bombshell](#) that followed announcements by Alabama Representative Parker Griffith that he was [switching parties](#) from Democrat to Republican, along with the retirement announcements from two Democrats from Tennessee and another one from Kansas. The battles that are currently raging in Nevada for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's seat and in Pennsylvania for Democrat Senator Arlen Specter's seat, along with the battles in Illinois and Delaware to fill the Senate seats formerly held by Democrats Barack Obama's and Joe Biden, indicate more than just a midterm election shift. According to David Wasserman of the [Cook Political Report](#):



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All things being equal, the turnout dynamics in a midterm cycle would probably cost House Democrats 10 to 15 seats. Throw in a rough national environment and our current outlook projects a GOP gain of 20 to 30 seats. Any further Democratic retirements or erosion in incumbents' standing could push that forecast higher.

At the moment, Democrats hold a 256-178 advantage in the House, and a 58-40 edge in the Senate (with two Independents siding with the Democrats). To take control of the House, Republicans would need to gain 40 seats; in the Senate a gain of 11 seats would be needed.

Some commentators are suggesting that the announced retirements of Democrat lawmakers are just the tip of the iceberg. Representative Lynn Westmoreland (Georgia), head of recruiting for the National Republican Congressional Committee, says he doesn't have to go looking for candidates to run for Democrat-held seats. All he has to do is answer the phone. "We've got people calling from all over the country saying 'I want to run.' People are concerned about the direction of the country. We've got doctors, farmers, business people — people from all walks of life."

Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, chairman of the Republican Governors Association, says, "The Obama administration's huge lurch to the left has scared people, made people concerned about the future of the country and convinced them that 2010 is a good year to run. Frankly, there hasn't been a



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need for much recruiting, because people have come forward.”

When commenting on Dorgan’s announced departure, Brian Walsh, a spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, [said](#), “This development is indicative of the difficult environment and slumping approval ratings that Democrats face as a result of their out of control tax-and-spend agenda in Washington, and we fully intend to capitalize on this opportunity by continuing to recruit strong candidates who can win these seats in November.”

Toby Harnden, U.S. editor for the *Daily Telegraph*, [wrote](#):

I certainly wouldn’t bet the farm (or even an outbuilding) on a GOP win that gives it 50 seats — far from it. Obama’s poll fortunes would have to continue to slump and absolutely everything would have to go right for Republicans. But just remember that in 2002 just about everything went right Senatewise for the GOP and in 2008 a similar thing happened for Democrats.

[According to commentator Dick Morris](#):

These retirements also send a signal to voters that is anything but helpful to President Obama: They signal that Democrats expect to lose. Nobody buys that these folks are leaving to spend more time with their families. Voters all realize that Democratic senators and congressmen are reading the handwriting on the walls, which sends the same message as the polls — that voters are fed up with the Obama administration and with the Democratic Party....

When a tsunami is coming, it’s very hard to predict how high the tide will go. Will it just lap over the swing states like Arkansas and Nevada? Will it go up to the lean-Democrat states and cost them seats in Delaware and Colorado? Or will it surge so far that it takes away Democratic Senate seats in solid Democratic states without elected incumbents like New York with Gillibrand, Illinois and Connecticut? Or will it so swamp the nation that even where Democratic incumbents are running in blue states, they are not safe in states like California, Washington, Indiana, Oregon and Pennsylvania?

Our bet is that the rising tide will swamp all their boats.

Democrats downplayed the significance of the retirement announcements last week. “For all the Republican hype, it is completely at odds with reality,” said Ryan Rudominor, spokesman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.” According to the *Washington Times*,

Democratic officials say the Republican talk of recruiting prowess is false bravado to mask the party’s persistent problems rebuilding credibility after what they describe as the excesses of President George W. Bush’s tenure. Republicans, they say, have not raised enough funds for campaigns to recapture Congress and are competing with the conservative “tea party” movement that doesn’t necessarily back the party’s candidates.

Some Senate Republicans are retiring as well, including Sam Brownback of Kansas, Kit Bond of Missouri, George Voinovich of Ohio, Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, and Jim Bunning of Kentucky. Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas is running in the primary for the Governor’s position, which could open her seat as well.

Roy Temple, a Democratic strategist, [candidly admitted](#): “It’s not good news for Democrats. The reality of this is going to be a challenging year, and this is an additional challenge you would prefer not to have. Because of [our] success of the last two cycles, there are a lot of seats to defend. [These retirements are] an additional complication.”



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Other Democrat strategists give little credence to the retirements, saying that they have little or nothing to do with the challenging political environment. Jim Jordan, a Democrat advisor, [says](#) simply, "These guys quit sometimes."

Anita Dunn, former Obama White House communications director, [minimized](#) the impact: "When you look at these races individually, our overall net position may [actually] have improved, particularly given that this is a bad year to be an incumbent. On the micro level, none of these [retirements], with the possible exception of North Dakota, are all that damaging."

The impact of the retirements of Dodd and Dorgan "essentially cancel each other [out] in terms of the outlook for the Senate," according to [The Rothenberg Political Report](#), which opines that the withdrawal of Dodd from the race improves the prospects of Democrats to keep his seat in the Democrat column in Connecticut.

However, in their [January 5 review](#), Rothenberg said, "We moved 21 House seats toward the Republicans. Substantial Republican gains now look almost inevitable, with net Democratic losses likely to exceed a dozen. While Democratic control of the House is not yet at risk, losses of 15-20 seats are likely, and that target range could well grow with additional Democratic retirements and voter anger."

Politico.com [says](#):

Even though it still seems unlikely that Republicans could win enough seats to recapture either chamber of Congress, the retirements are hardening the view among longtime Democrats that the party will suffer significant losses this fall.

"Democrats will still clearly be in control of the House and Senate, but we won't have the margins that we had before," said former Louisiana Sen. John Breaux. "The numbers will be determined by how we address the economy, the jobs issue. If we can focus in on that with more clarity, then we can prevent potential losses from getting out of hand."

The Obama healthcare bill could be especially costly to Democrat incumbents, according the liberal blog [FireDogLake.com](#), which happens to agree on this issue with the conservative [FreedomWorks.com](#).

A careful reading of those 20 who appear to be in the most danger of losing their seats reveals that, without exception, they have scored poorly in *The New American's* "[Freedom Index](#)," which rates Congressmen on their adherence to constitutional principles.

As Max Pappas from FreedomWorks says, "grassroots activism works because politicians want to get re-elected ... [and these] are the ones most likely to listen to us — because they know they will be begging for our votes this November when they're behind in the polls." That grassroots activism may have much to do with the final result of the midterm elections. The Tea Party "movement" has already had an impact on the election. In Florida, the state GOP chairman, Jim Greer, announced his plan to resign in the face of criticism from TP activists for supporting a liberal in the Senate race rather than a conservative.

Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele is urging candidates to "embrace" the Tea Party movement. "The tea party movement is a revelatory moment for us ... and I think it's important for our party to appreciate and understand it, so we can move towards it, embrace it," Steele [told](#) Fox News.

Politico.com quoted Steele [saying](#): "[There's] a lot more going on there than meets the eye. That's why



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I'm getting back to this conservative movement in the party or whatever you want to call it."

But what will Steele's stated goal of embracing the tea party/conservative movement mean in practice? Will it mean that the Republican Party leadership — which is laden with neo-conservatives and has supported its share of big-spending programs such as the \$700 billion TARP bailout bill — will move closer to its anti-big-spending rhetoric? Or will it mean instead that the Republican Party will try to capitalize on the growing resentment against runaway spending in order to get Republicans elected, while offering the same old policies? Whether or not real change takes place in Washington hinges on how informed and involved constitutionalists in the tea-party movement and elsewhere become to make sure that we are not once again led astray by neoconservative pied pipers — and that lawmakers, regardless of their party affiliation, put principle above party and uphold the Constitution.

As a [blogger](#) at Investors.com said, "Tea Party folks want [a] constitutional republic, not necessarily Republicans."



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