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A House Subtracted

Will Voter Discontent Doom the GOP Majority? Figure It Out.

By Libby Copeland
Washington Post Staff Writer

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Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country -- and do some math!

That's right, kids, pull out your pocket calculators and let's figure out if the Democrats have a shot at winning a majority in the House this fall.

The wise people of Washington are knee-deep in numbers these days, trying to compute which candidates are vulnerable and which ones are lost causes, and where to devote precious money and resources. Oh, the joy and the horror of all those calculations, all those parsed polls and historical averages -- like fantasy baseball, only with the future of the country at stake.

This much we know: The Democrats need 15 more seats to take control of the House for the first time in 12 years. How the party can achieve that magic 15 (or not) depends on whom you talk to, and how they spin the special election that took place in California last week to replace ethically challenged and now-imprisoned Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R). They may invoke "drag," the Partisan Voting Index and something called "clump theory." They may bring up 1994 and they may bring up 1974. They may start talking about NASCAR and hurricanes.

Now, wait a minute. This is just math, right? Isn't there a right answer?

Grover Norquist, president of the conservative group Americans for Tax Reform, breaks it down this way.

"Democrats must win 74 percent of all competitive races to gain the majority," he writes in this month's American Spectator. "Not impossible, but difficult."

Nuh-uh, says Amy Walter, who crunches House numbers for Cook Political Report. "They need to win 56 percent of all the competitive races."

Well, just how many "competitive" races are there?

"Fifty-seven," says Bernadette Budde, political analyst for the Business Industry Political Action Committee.

"Two dozen," says Scott Reiter, a representative of the Realtors Political Action Committee.

It takes a particular sort of person to enjoy this.

There is Stuart Rothenberg of the Rothenberg Political Report -- who, appropriately, is managing five fantasy baseball teams at the moment -- and who parses the House races into eight categories. These include "Pure Toss-Up," "Toss-Up/Tilt Republican," "Lean Republican" and "Republican Favored," and the equivalent groups for Democrats.

There is Reiter, who says, "I love numbers," and who in seventh grade tracked his Ms. Pac-Man scores with a flowchart.

Walter of the Cook Political Report tries to explain how if you use 1994 as a guide and you assume a "tidal wave" of voter discontent that expands the number of toss-up races to, say, 40, and you multiply 40 by 75 percent, then -- she stops herself.

"We're getting a little bit too in-the-weeds," she says.

The California special election won by Republican Brian Bilbray last week is either really encouraging for the GOP or really encouraging for Democrats, depending on what you take into account. Do you consider the vast sums of money spent by Republicans? The number of Democrats and Republicans in the district? How the district voted in the 2004 presidential election?

Some people say there could be a 5 to 10 percent "drag" on Republicans because of the national mood. Walter tries to explain this theory by imagining Republican incumbent Deborah Pryce of Ohio running a 50-yard dash wearing a 50-pound backpack.

Whoa.

We ask Rothenberg to put his expertise on the line: How many seats will the Democrats take?

"Eight to 12," he says at first, then backs up. That's what the science tells him, he says, but his "gut" tells him "15 to 20."

What numbers cannot convey, strained weather analogies surely can. People talk about a "Category 5" hurricane that could sweep Democrats into office. They talk about a "wind" and a "tsunami." They debate whether a big wave could "breach the wall" of incumbencies. They suggest that the Democrats could put a lot of "surfboards in the water" and then . . .

You get the idea.

"We should all be barred from using the word 'wave,' " Reiter says.

Right. Let's go back to the math. It made at least as much sense.

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