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## For the GOP, a Heartland Plunge

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By David S. Broder

Thursday, August 17, 2006; A25

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- When the Columbus Dispatch's respected poll recently reported that Republican Secretary of State Ken Blackwell was trailing Democratic Rep. Ted Strickland by 20 points in the race for governor of Ohio, there was dismay but no shock among his fellow Republicans. Those I interviewed during a recent visit here said they had seen it coming for a long time.

But it is a political earthquake. Democrats have not been able to win a single statewide office in Ohio for most of the past decade -- and are completely shut out of power in the capitol at this moment. Strickland has never run a statewide campaign and is trying to become the first person since Rutherford B. Hayes to go from Congress to Ohio's governorship. Blackwell has won election in Ohio and led the successful campaign that gave George Bush this state -- and the presidency -- over John Kerry in 2004.

And yet, when the Dispatch poll came out, the best that Blackwell could say was that his own internal surveys showed him trailing by only 11 points -- as if that were a consolation.

What I heard here -- and in subsequent interviews at the National Governors Association convention in Charleston, S.C. -- from one Republican after another signaled serious trouble for the GOP across a broad swath of states from Pennsylvania to Oklahoma in key midterm election contests for House, Senate and governor.

The impression these Republicans had is that support for GOP candidates had nose-dived this summer -- in part because of the chaos conveyed by the daily televised scenes of destruction in Iraq and Lebanon and in part because of the dismal reputation built by the Republican Congress that is home to many of the endangered GOP candidates.

It may be that the cease-fire in the Israel-Lebanon war and the shift of focus to the terrorist plot thwarted last week by the British will change the political environment. But Republicans were deeply worried as August began.

I had dinner one night with a group of Ohio Republicans, all with many years of experience in state politics and none directly engaged in this year's gubernatorial race. One of them said, "I'm afraid this could be another 1982," a year when recession pushed unemployment to 15 percent and cost the Republicans the governorship. Another said, "I'd settle right now for another 1982. I'm afraid it will be another 1974," the year of the Watergate election, when Democrats swept everything in sight.

Ohio may be particularly vulnerable because the economy in parts of the state where the auto industry remains vital has been hurt by layoffs, and because a series of scandals has left retiring Gov. Bob Taft with approval ratings in the teens. But similar concerns are voiced across the Midwest.

A leading Minnesota Republican told me that polls there show "the bottom has dropped out" of Rep. Mark Kennedy's challenge to Hennepin County Attorney Amy Klobuchar, the Democratic candidate for an open Democratic Senate seat. Kennedy has company among the corps of Republican congressmen who thought this would be a good year to move up. In Wisconsin, Rep. Mark Green is lagging slightly behind Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle. In Oklahoma, Rep. Ernest J. Istook Jr. is far worse off in his challenge to Democratic Gov. Brad Henry. And in Iowa, Rep. Jim Nussle, the strong early favorite to capture the open governorship from the Democrats, now finds himself in a real battle with Democrat Chet Culver.

For all of them, service in this Congress has turned out to be a handicap rather than a benefit to their chances of advancement. The reason was explained in blunt terms by the Republican governor of one of the states where a congressman of his party is struggling for statewide office. "What has this Congress done that anyone should applaud?" he asked scornfully. "Nothing on immigration, nothing on health care, nothing on energy -- and nothing on the war. They deserve a good kick in the pants, and that's what they're going to get."

That prediction is supported by the AP-Ipsos poll released last week. It showed a 33 percent job approval score for Bush and a 29 percent job approval score for the Republican Congress. On a test of voter preference for the midterm congressional elections, Democrats had a staggering 18-point lead, 55 percent to 37 percent. You can see why Republicans are worried.

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