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The Fix

By Chris Cillizza

washingtonpost.com's Politics Blog

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Friday Line: How Many Seats Will Dems Gain in the Senate?

A combination of the unending Democratic presidential race (which now appears at an end) and the special election woes of House Republicans have combined to push 2008's U.S. Senate races to the back burner.

But they've not been forgotten by The Fix, who has an abnormal fascination with all congressional contests.

Status quo reigns on the Senate playing field at the moment, with Democrats very well positioned to pick up between 2-4 seats. Even higher gains are a possibility. Republicans' best hope is to pick off the lone Democratic seat where they are competitive -- Louisiana -- and keep losses among their own incumbents to two or three.

Regardless, Democrats are almost certain to keep (and grow) the majority they won in 2006. How big a majority they have in January 2009 depends on how many incumbents they can oust.

As always, the number one ranked race is the most likely to switch parties in the fall. Got an opinion or suggestion about a contest that is (or isn't) on the Line? Use the comments section to tell us what you think.

Without further adieu -- to the Line!

10. **Maine:** There is a simple fact dominating this race: voters like Sen. [Susan Collins](#) (R) and overwhelmingly approve of the job she has done in the Senate. Unlike some Republican incumbents working hard of late to distance themselves from **President Bush**, Collins has a long record of moderation. Rep. [Tom Allen](#) (D) is a good candidate and has a very solid team around him. But, it's hard to see why voters would fire Collins. (Previous ranking: 9)

9. **North Carolina:** We've been somewhat slow to come around on this race -- North Carolina is, after all, a conservative state. State Sen. [Kay Hagan](#) (D) ran a solid primary campaign and gets rave reviews from Democratic operatives who aren't easily impressed. Democrats are also overjoyed with several polls (of varying credibility) that show Hagan running virtually even with Sen. [Elizabeth Dole](#) (R). That seems a bit ambitious but with Sen. [Barack Obama](#) (Ill.) promising to contest the Tarheel State and Hagan preparing to run a well funded and active campaign, this race could get interesting. (Previous ranking: N/A)

8. **Oregon:** State House Speaker [Jeff Merkley](#) has been one of the most disappointing candidates so far this cycle. Recruited into the race by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Merkley has struggled to transition from state legislative politics to a U.S. Senate

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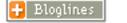
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campaign. Those struggles have been exacerbated by the surprising strength -- fundraising and otherwise -- of party activist [Steve Novick](#). Polling, public and private, suggests Novick could well pull the upset in Tuesday's primary. Democrats insist either candidate will be competitive against Sen. [Gordon Smith](#) (R), but that runs counter to the national party's decision to recruit Merkley when Novick was already running. (Previous ranking: 8)

7. **Minnesota:** Call it The Fix curse. Regular readers of the Line know we have been impressed by the campaign that comedian-turned-candidate [Al Franken](#) (D) has run to date. Cue a tax problem. [Franken has decided to pay \\$70,000 in back taxes](#) in 17 states after several weeks of drip-drip revelations. Franken said he had been misinformed by his account, acknowledged the mistake, and sought to move on. Still, it gives Sen. [Norm Coleman](#) (R) -- a terrific politician -- a major opening to exploit in the fall. (Previous ranking: 6)

6. **Louisiana:** As the election cycle has progressed, it's become more and more clear that Republicans' pickup chances have narrowed to this single seat. State Treasurer [John Kennedy](#) (R) put together a very solid first fundraising quarter -- \$1.4 million raised -- although he still trails Sen. [Mary Landrieu](#) (D) badly in terms of cash on hand. It didn't help Kennedy's cause that the [Huffington Post obtained an opposition research document](#) put together by Senate Republicans during Kennedy's 2004 Senate bid -- when he ran as a Democrat. Um, not good. Still, Republicans need to play offense somewhere and this is the only realistic shot they have. (Previous ranking: 7)

5. **Alaska:** The Fix met Anchorage Mayor [Mark Begich](#) (D) earlier this week and came away impressed. Begich, unlike many local officeholders, had an understanding of the enormity of the challenge of defeating an incumbent -- in this case Sen. [Ted Stevens](#) (R) -- but is also confident in his ability to do so. Begich's deep roots in Alaska -- he was born and raised there -- and his base in the media market that covers the majority of the state would make him formidable even if Stevens weren't ensnared in an ongoing federal investigation into a pay-to-play lobbying scandal. A [recent poll conducted for the liberal blog Daily Kos](#) showed Begich with a six point edge. This is an emerging Democratic opportunity. (Previous ranking: 5)

4. **New Hampshire:** Sen. [John Sununu](#) (R) runs unorthodox but effective campaigns. In 2002, Sununu, then a House incumbent, started extremely slowly in his primary challenge to Sen. [Bob Smith](#) but won with relative ease and went on to defeat former governor [Jeanne Shaheen](#) (D) -- who is back for a rematch. So, while many Republicans are concerned about the pace of Sununu's campaign and the fact that [he still trails Shaheen by double digits](#), this is a race likely to close in the coming months. (Previous ranking: 3)

3. **Colorado:** After the 2006 election, Republicans hoped they had heard the last of [disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff](#). They likely have not. The revelation that a 1999 trip by former Rep. [Bob Schaffer](#) (R) to the Mariana Islands [was arranged in part by Abramoff's firm](#) led to several weeks of bad press for the Republicans' nominee in this open seat race to replace Sen. [Wayne Allard](#) (R), who will retire after this term. Both Schaffer and Rep. [Mark Udall](#) (D) are now on television with ads introducing themselves to voters. Colorado is a state in flux but how much has it changed? This race should tell us. Udall has an edge. (Previous ranking: 4)

2. **New Mexico:** Reps. [Steve Pearce](#) and [Heather Wilson](#) are, as expected, starting to take the bark off one another as the June GOP primary draws closer. Pearce is insisting he is the only true conservative in the race while Wilson is casting Pearce as a lackluster defender of the state's interests. Meanwhile, Democratic Rep. [Tom](#)

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[Udall](#) (cousin of the above-mentioned Mark) continues to collect cash and sit on a double digit lead over either Republican candidate. This contest continues to look better and better for Democrats. (Previous ranking: 2)

1. **Virginia:** Former governor [Mark Warner](#) (D) is as close to a sure thing as you can get in politics. Warner is so heavily favored to replace outgoing Sen. [John Warner](#) (R) that the Fix already finds his eye wandering to the 2009 gubernatorial race in the Commonwealth. (Previous ranking: 1)

By Chris Cillizza | May 16, 2008: 6:00 AM ET | Category: [Eye on 2008](#)
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North Carolina (Hagan (D) v. Dole (R) at least deserves to be number 6 on the list. For one thing, Hagan is at least as competitive as Al Franken and Merkley/Novick are to Norm Coleman and Gordon Smith respectively.

She didn't have to go through a competitive primary like Merkley/Novick are and she doesn't have the amount of baggage/high negatives Franken brings with him. Along with Alaska, I think NC has the potential to be the real sleeper of this cycle.

Posted by: Marc | May 19, 2008 11:31 PM

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