

SPECIAL REPORT: ELECTION PREVIEW

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GOP's New Senate Class Could Be Conservative Vanguard

THE GOP CLASS OF 2010 MARCHES IN STEP ON MOST ISSUES, DETERMINED TO CUT WASHINGTON DOWN TO SIZE.

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by Ronald Brownstein

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. -- Ken Buck, the Republican Senate nominee in Colorado, is a veteran prosecutor and the district attorney of Weld County. But it wasn't a closing argument that he delivered during a debate here last weekend with Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet. It was more like a call to arms.

"We have expressed our opinions to Washington, D.C.," Buck began.

"We have let them know when they were running up debt that we didn't want it anymore. We told them to get off the back of small business.... When they tried to pass the nationalized health care bill, we sent them e-mails. We told them we need to secure our borders."

Buck's supporters at the debate, held in a deeply conservative community, had raucously cheered and jeered over the previous hour. They fell into silence as he enumerated their grievances. Then he did everything but pass out the pitchforks. "They have heard us; they heard us," he continued. "But they *ignored* us. And come November 2, folks, they will ignore us no more."

In that cri de coeur, Buck encapsulated the energy, confidence, and revolutionary zeal crackling through the huge class of GOP Senate challengers now approaching the Capitol from all points on the map. In red, blue, and purple states alike, Republicans this year have nominated deeply conservative candidates such as Buck who vow to unravel much of what President Obama and the Democratic Congress have constructed over the past two years -- and then march on to challenge the legacies of Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt. Polls today suggest that many of them will get the chance to try.

Unless Democrats can recover lost ground, it appears likely that the 2010 elections will produce the biggest crop of freshman Republican senators since the 11 who arrived in 1994, and possibly even the 16 who were part of Ronald Reagan's landslide in 1980. Across a wide range of issues, the potential GOP Senate class of 2010 leans right even when compared with those earlier groups -- some contenders hold positions on the far frontier of modern American politics. Next year could bring to Washington the most consistently, and even militantly, conservative class of new senators in at least the

GRAPHIC

Few Differences on Issues

Click on the image to see a graphic showing the policy agenda of the GOP Senate challengers.

past half-century.

The Republican Party's nominees are "more uniform in their philosophy, more populist, and more anti-Washington" than the 1980 and '94 GOP arrivals, says Craig Shirley, who has been active in conservative politics since the 1970s and has written a Reagan biography. "Today there is less [ideological] diversity and more unanimity of thinking."

Former Republican Rep. Vin Weber, who was elected from Minnesota in 1980 and helped plan the House GOP's ascendancy into the 1990s, agrees. "We ran on a few big issues in 1980 -- an across-the-board tax cut, rebuilding the American military, a few things like that," says Weber, now a Washington lobbyist. "But the laundry list of conservative issues was a little shorter in those days and, as a result, you had a wider ideological range of candidates running for office around the country as Republicans. This class is more [ideologically] coherent, and it is largely in response to what they are hearing from their constituencies."

The staunchly conservative views held by most of the GOP Senate nominees promise some rough seas for the party before November. Embattled Democrats are already painting Buck, Nevada's Sharron Angle, and other Republican candidates as extremists committed to undoing popular government programs such as Social Security and Medicare. But if all of those who now look likely to win end up victorious in November, it will be Washington that feels the storm.

Few of the 2010 Republicans believe they are being sent to the Senate to compromise with Obama -- or to defer to a GOP leadership that several have portrayed as part of the problem. "I really think that many of the folks who are going to go there think it is much more important to change the dynamics in Washington than it is to get re-elected," Buck said in an interview. "As a result, I think there will be a period of time in the Republican caucus where there will be some friction, some anxiety, maybe misunderstanding."

The dominance of conservative candidates in this year's crop of GOP Senate challengers reflects both short- and long-term trends. The deep trend is the ideological re-sorting of voters over the past half-century -- a dynamic that has left each party, but especially the GOP, with a more homogenous electoral coalition.

Today, about four-fifths of Republican voters identify themselves as conservatives, providing conservative candidates a consistent (though not insurmountable) edge in contested primaries. That tilt has been dramatically reinforced this year by the surge into the party of small-government tea party activists recoiling from the cost and scope of Obama's agenda -- and also rejecting the "Big Government" conservatism that some consider part of George W. Bush's legacy. Taken together, these intersecting dynamics have allowed candidates hugging the right rail to defeat more-tempered conservative candidates for the Senate in states as diverse as Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, and Utah.

Amateurs And Veterans

Although tea party-infused outsiders have mostly set the tone, the Republican nominees present a rather diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Of the 21 GOP Senate challengers whom political analysts give a serious chance of winning in November, nine have never held elective office. The neophytes range from well-pressed global corporate executives (California's Carly Fiorina) and an appointed state attorney general (Kelly Ayotte in New Hampshire) to longtime conservative activists once considered fringe figures (Christine O'Donnell in Delaware and Rand Paul in Kentucky).

"There will be a period of time in the Republican caucus where there will be some friction." -- Ken Buck

The group includes four House members (John Boozman of Arkansas, Mark Kirk of Illinois, Jerry Moran of Kansas, and Roy Blunt of Missouri); three former members (Dan Coats of Indiana, Rob Portman of Ohio, and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania); and five state or local elected officials (ranging from Buck to North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven to Angle, who functioned mostly as a gadfly in the Nevada state

Assembly and has more in common with Paul than with Hoeven.)

Depending on November's results, that mix suggests that the Senate class of 2010 could tilt more toward outsider first-time candidates than did the past two big GOP infusions. The vast Reagan class of 1980 is remembered largely for inexperienced first-timers such as Alabama's Jeremiah Denton and North Carolina's John East, but 12 of its 16 members had held at least one elective office before their victories (including six from the House). Arguably, none of the 11 GOP senators who rode Newt Gingrich's tide to victory in 1994 were true outsiders: The closest was probably actor and lawyer Fred Thompson, but even he knew his way around Washington from his work on the Watergate investigation in the 1970s.

The sharpest difference between the previous two big GOP Senate classes and this year's likely group, however, isn't experience, but ideological consistency. Both the 1980 and '94 elections swept in many staunch conservatives (such as Denton and Dan Quayle in the first group, and Rick Santorum and James Inhofe in the second). But in each case, the tide also delivered several moderates. In 1980, the class included New Hampshire's Warren Rudman, Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter, and Washington's Slade Gorton; the 1994 group included Olympia Snowe of Maine and Mike DeWine of Ohio. Throughout their careers, these legislators frequently paddled in a lonely direction as the prevailing current in the GOP steadily flowed to the right.

This year's Republican Senate nominees aren't monolithic in their approach to governance. But their differences revolve around the extent of change they propose, not the direction. Of the 2010 hopefuls, perhaps only Kirk would qualify as a moderate by the standards of those earlier centrists. And even Kirk, who represents a suburban Chicago swing district, has moved to the right in his Senate campaign.

The most ideologically aggressive candidates, such as Angle, Buck, Alaska's Joe Miller, and Paul, may envision a more fundamental long-range assault on Washington's role in society than more-established contenders such as Blunt and Portman. But on the choices that Congress will face next year about spending, taxes, energy, immigration, and health care, the GOP Senate nominees display a remarkable unity behind a deeply conservative agenda. And even candidates beyond the tea party vanguard have signaled that, over time, they may be open to restructuring Medicare and Social Security -- key elements of the social safety net constructed during the New Deal and the Great Society.

Policy Convergence

The GOP class of 2010's ideological convergence extends across a broad terrain. All of the Senate candidates have endorsed a balanced-budget constitutional amendment (except Fiorina, who hasn't taken a position). Every one except Hoeven has pledged to oppose any tax increases. And all 21 have said they support permanently extending the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts for all families.

In 2005, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., won votes from half a dozen Republican senators for his cap-and-trade legislation limiting emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases linked to global climate change. But all 21 of the leading GOP Senate challengers have declared their opposition to cap-and-trade (and, for that matter, so now has McCain). Even Kirk, who voted for cap-and-trade legislation in the House last year, has renounced his support.

Nineteen of the 20 Republican Senate nominees who have expressed an opinion on the widespread scientific consensus that greenhouse gases are altering the world's climate have declared the science either inconclusive or dead wrong, often in vitriolic terms. (Kirk is the only exception.) Ron Johnson, a business owner who won his party's nomination in Wisconsin, says that accumulating carbon dioxide emissions are a less likely cause of any climate change than "sunspot activity or something just in the geologic eons of time where we have changes in the climate."

All 18 GOP candidates who have taken a position support expanded drilling for oil and gas on public lands. All 19 who have taken a position want to expand construction of nuclear power plants. In each case, these positions represent a nearly complete rejection of the views of the leading environmental groups -- many of which worked closely with significant numbers of congressional Republicans in earlier decades. "Those Republicans are all gone," says veteran environmental lobbyist Dan Becker.

On immigration, as well, the 2010 class captures a sharp right turn in the GOP. As recently as 2006, 23 Republican senators voted -- with the enthusiastic support of President Bush -- for comprehensive immigration legislation that linked tougher border security, a guest-worker program, and a pathway to

citizenship for millions of illegal immigrants now in the United States. But now, all 20 GOP nominees who have taken a position say that Washington should toughen border security *before* considering any broader immigration reform. What's more, all 19 who have expressed a view say they will oppose any "amnesty" or pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants even if Congress considers more-comprehensive reform at a later date.

"We need to phase Medicare and Social Security out in favor of something privatized." -- Sharron Angle, Republican Senate candidate, Nevada

"No excuse, no other circumstance, no other reason that allows illegal immigrants to stay in this country should be accepted," Coats declares on his website. Likewise, Miller, who wrested the Alaska nomination from Sen. Lisa Murkowski, has declared: "When you reward lawbreaking, you encourage more of the same. One of the reasons we have such a huge illegal immigrant problem today is the amnesty offered under the Reagan administration."

On health care, the consensus is equally striking. All but one of the 2010 Republicans have said they will vote to repeal Obama's comprehensive health care legislation. Most are unconditional in their denunciation. Johnson captured the tone when he declared, "I view the health care bill as the single greatest assault to our freedom in my lifetime." The only major GOP Senate candidate who has not embraced outright repeal is Hoeven; his campaign spokeswoman says he believes that "the health care bill needs to be fixed. That may involve repealing major portions of it." (Kirk, running in Obama's home state, has sent somewhat mixed signals: In March, he declared he "would lead the effort" to repeal the health law, but since then he has qualified his comments, without directly renouncing the earlier statement.)

In place of the Democratic health care plan, every GOP nominee except Fiorina has endorsed long-standing party proposals to allow the interstate sale of health insurance policies -- an approach that supporters say will spur competition and lower prices and that opponents charge will undermine consumer protections and risk-sharing. Except for John Raese of West Virginia, every one of them who has taken a position supports tort reform that would restrict medical-malpractice cases.

Beyond repealing health care reform, many in the 2010 class back other changes in the social safety net. About half have expressed support for the long-standing GOP proposal (last promoted by Bush in 2005) to allow workers to divert part of their payroll taxes into private investment accounts while reducing guaranteed Social Security benefits. (Six of the contenders, though, have explicitly opposed that idea, including, perhaps surprisingly, conservative favorite Marco Rubio in Florida, who says it is an idea whose time "has come and gone.")

A few of the candidates have also signaled support for the proposal from Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., to convert Medicare into a voucher that future retirees could use to buy private insurance (Blunt, Boozman, and Kansas's Moran voted for a 2009 House Republican budget that included the idea, though Moran's office says that his vote for the budget does not mean he has embraced Ryan's proposal.)

The convergence extends beyond these economic issues. Despite the libertarian flavor of much tea party rhetoric, the 2010 contenders uphold the GOP's social-conservative consensus. Of the 21, only Kirk and Connecticut's Linda McMahon support abortion rights; several of the others, including Angle, Buck, Miller, and Paul, would ban abortion even in cases of rape and incest. Longtime conservative strategist Jeff Bell observes that "none of them are the people that the [libertarian] Cato Institute envisioned," who would oppose government intervention on social as well as economic issues. "The tea party and the social conservatives," he says, "are part of the same thing."

On foreign policy, a few hints of disagreement surface. Some of the tea party favorites have expressed weariness with the world-altering designs of the neoconservatives who dominated GOP national security policy under Bush. In last week's Colorado Springs debate, Buck insisted, "We cannot be in the nation-building business. We don't have the funds; we don't have the time."

The potential dispute over foreign affairs remains mostly latent, however. All of the GOP Senate

contenders who expressed a position supported Obama's troop surge in Afghanistan, and all who expressed a position oppose his timetable to begin withdrawing those troops in July. "The only issue that has yet to be settled is the issue of national defense and how it manifests in Iraq and Afghanistan," Shirley says. "There is a growing voice in conservatism that says nine years is enough and it's time to get out."

Diminish Federal Power

All of this is on the agenda that the Republican candidates say they intend to pursue in 2011. But it's clear that many of them envision these proposals as only a first step toward a more transformative platform that they hope to build over time. The sweep of these long-term ambitions may be the real dividing line between many of the GOP Senate challengers and much of the existing Republican caucus.

Five of the challengers (Boozman, Utah's Mike Lee, Moran, Miller, and Paul) have said they would support amending the Constitution to eliminate birthright citizenship, which grants citizenship to any child born in the United States even if the parents are here illegally. While several of the group have explicitly opposed that idea, candidates with such diverse pedigrees as Ayotte, Angle, Hoeven, and Raese have also said they would be open to such an amendment.

At various points, some of the candidates (including Angle, Buck, and Miller) have questioned whether Washington should provide Medicare or Social Security at all. Angle phrased the objection most unabashedly when she declared, "We need to phase Medicare and Social Security out in favor of something privatized."

Since then, the three candidates have moved in various ways to qualify or retract their statements on the entitlement programs, Buck most aggressively. But behind the rhetorical maneuvering, several of the GOP contenders have expressed a consistent interest in moving Social Security and Medicare away from guaranteeing recipients "defined benefits" (such as a minimum monthly retirement check or specified medical benefits) toward a "defined contribution" system in which government would provide seniors a fixed sum of money, either to fund a retirement investment account or to purchase private health insurance.

"The tea party and the social conservatives are part of the same thing." -- Jeff Bell, conservative strategist

The popularity of those views among the GOP contenders suggests that a Republican-run Senate might eventually face a reprise of the 2005 fight over Social Security, in which Bush touted such changes as a means of increasing opportunity and control for retirees. Opponents carried the day by portraying the proposals as government shifting financial risk from its shoulders to individuals.

The interest in reconfiguring entitlements is just one component of the GOP contenders' large and ambitious agenda. By embracing a balanced-budget amendment while supporting the extension of the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts and pledging to oppose any future tax increases, they would be constructing a long-term fiscal vise that seeks to force a dramatic reduction in federal spending, influence, and involvement across a wide swath of American life, potentially including national defense.

Over time, those policies would create a federal role "much closer to what our constitutional framers intended," Buck argued in the interview. "There are going to be areas where the federal government is going to have to say to states, 'This was your job 50 years ago, and it is going to be your job again. We will try to supplement education, [but the] bottom line is, education is a local and state area, and you are going to have to take the major role in education. Other than interstate highways and some other roads feeding into interstate highways, [we must say to] states: 'This is primarily your [responsibility].' [Washington] will not be a solution to every problem anymore; [the federal government is] going to have to rely on partnerships with state and local governments."

The belief that Washington has overstepped its constitutional bounds inspires several of this year's Senate contenders to assail other programs that have long been considered sacrosanct. Raese says he opposes the minimum wage. "He thinks the market should be setting wages," his spokesman says.

Paul, before backtracking, questioned the provisions in the 1964 Civil Rights Act that bar private discrimination. Miller has argued that unemployment insurance is unconstitutional. "I think we as a people need to stop being disingenuous about what the Constitution provides for," he insisted on *Fox News Sunday* this week. "It does not provide for this all-encompassing power that we've seen exercised over the last several decades."

There's virtually no chance that Republicans would seriously seek to repeal those programs. But those philosophies illuminate the restrictive view of federal authority that would guide many of the potential new senators.

Democrats Denounce 'Extremism'

Before they can advance any of these ideas, of course, the GOP's Senate contenders must win their elections this fall. Some of them (particularly Coats, Boozman, Hoeven, Lee, and Portman) appear to hold virtually insurmountable leads. But to varying degrees, the rest are in competitive races in which their Democratic opponents are relentlessly assailing them as "extremists." In television advertisements or attacks on the stump, Democrats have tried to stick that label on fully two-thirds of the major Republican Senate candidates. And Democrats aren't the only ones firing that charge: Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski last week denounced Joe Miller's "extremist views" when launching a write-in bid to hold her seat.

Mark Mellman, a veteran Democratic pollster, argues that Republicans have given Democrats "opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have" by choosing Senate candidates at the militant edge of the conservative movement (such as O'Donnell and Paul) or forcing nominees to move right to win primaries (Fiorina, for instance, in California). "If the only subject of discussion is how bad things are now, Democrats are in trouble," Mellman says. "But when you have people who want to abolish Social Security, you have something else to talk about, where Democrats are on the side of the overwhelming majority of the public."

Privately, some Republican strategists agree that the class of 2010's sharp ideological tenor may leave some Senate seats on the table that the GOP might otherwise have won. But with polls showing that a significant majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the country's direction, and with many people questioning the cost and effectiveness of Obama's agenda, the tailwinds may be great enough to propel candidates who in other times might be too doctrinaire to win. "Right now, to be on the anti-government side of a whole range of issues is a lot less risky than it would have been in previous election cycles, including in 1980 and 1994," Weber says.

Just like those earlier classes, the Republicans who get elected to the Senate in 2010 will likely find it more difficult to sustain public support for rolling back government once the debate moves from broad campaign themes to the specifics of governing, such as eliminating programs or regulatory protections. But for now, both the White House and Washington's GOP leadership may need to brace for the arrival of a large class of new Senate Republicans who see the Reagan and Gingrich revolutions as only the first cuts in the extreme makeover they want to perform on Washington.

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