



## Don Walton: Election resources matter

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A month from tomorrow, voters put an end to this mostly unpleasant election season.

Those are not happy campers out there.

An anti-incumbent mood appears to be pervasive. But, in practice, it's likely to be selective just as it usually is.

The most endangered incumbents are likely to be Democratic House members who rode the Obama wave in 2008 to win election in traditionally Republican congressional districts.

Sayonara.

In a state like Nebraska where one party dominates, most incumbents are likely to be relatively safe.

The one most in danger, of course, is Lee Terry, who represents Nebraska's only competitive congressional district and faces the only Democratic challenger with campaign resources.

Tom White is Terry's opponent in Nebraska's premier contest, and it presumably could go either way.

Terry's campaign operatives were pumped last week to see the new Rothenberg Political Report assessment taking the Nebraska slot off his list of House "seats in play."

Rothenberg sees 86 seats in play, 13 of them rated as pure tossups. He gives Democrats the edge in 43 races and Republicans the advantage in 30.

Democrats believe they would have won that Omaha House seat in 2008 with White's resume and the Obama surge in the 2nd District.

Turnout will be considerably different in this non-presidential year, but this is a battle that conceivably could tilt one way or the other in the final four weeks.

A stumble could matter.

Or a gangbuster ad.

For Democrats, it's a reminder how much resources matter if they're going to compete.

Just ask Mike Meister, who is trying to mount an issue-driven challenge to Dave Heineman's re-election as governor.

Meister does not have the resources to broaden his visibility or deliver his message on television through saturation advertising.

"I haven't been able to hit a home run on fund-raising," he says.

"More like a single, maybe stretched to a double."

While Meister started late as a seventh inning substitute for Mark Laker after he withdrew from the race, the governor started with nearly six years of incumbency and more than a million dollars in the bank. And counting.

Tough odds.

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At USDA, still a Nebraska connection.

Mike Johanns served as secretary of agriculture for nearly three years during the final term of the Bush administration.

Now our neighbor Tom Vilsack is in charge.

But there's a cadre of Nebraskans at USDA in Washington.

Here's a look:

- Karen Barry, Vilsack's chief of staff, is originally from Banner County, where her brother farms.
- John Berge of Gering is deputy to the undersecretary for congressional relations and acting White House liaison.
- Darci Vetter, who hails from Hamilton County where her dad and mom farm, is deputy undersecretary of farm and foreign ag services, specializing in trade issues.
- Jonathan Coppess, administrator of the Farm Service Agency, worked as Sen. Ben Nelson's ag staffer for several years.
- Chuck Lippstreu, formerly of Lincoln, serves on Coppess' staff.

When Nebraska FSA Director Dan Steinkruger recently was in Washington, he heard references to the "Nebraska Mafia" at USDA.

Steinkruger sent the names in an e-mail last month.

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Dave Heineman gets a surprisingly low C grade from the Cato Institute in its new fiscal policy report card for governors.

The limited-government, and essentially libertarian, think tank described Heineman as "outstanding" during his first few years in office because he spearheaded substantial tax reductions.

In recent years, his grade has been "dragged down because he has proposed increases in general fund spending (while) general fund spending in many states has fallen," Cato says.

The fiscal report card is single-minded and narrowly focused, the institute readily acknowledges.

"Governors who have cut taxes and spending the most receive the highest grades," it says.

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Mike Johanns says the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax reductions should not only be extended, but made permanent.

The White House proposal to allow tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans to expire at the end of the year "isn't acceptable because it has a punishing impact on job creators," Johanns said during a conference call last week.

"Raising taxes at a time like this when the economy is struggling to come out of a recession is bad economic policy," Johanns said.

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#### **Finishing up:**

- Douglas County voter registration numbers: Democrats, 125,296; Republicans, 120,783; independents, 66,587.
- Hey, c'mon, MLB, Game 7 of the World Series scheduled for the night of Nov. 4? Get out the parkas.
- Are Wildcats as tough as Jackrabbits?

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