

Five more Republicans join exodus from House of Representatives

By Patrick Martin
1 February 2008

Five more long-serving Republican congressmen have confirmed they will not run for reelection this year, in a week of retirements capped by the announcement Wednesday by Representative Tom Davis, a former top leader in the House of Representatives when it was under Republican control.

The retirements bring the number of Republican incumbents who will not be on the ballot in November to 28 out of the 200 elected only 14 months ago. This compares to only six Democrats who will not be seeking reelection, greatly increasing the number of open seats that are more vulnerable to takeover by the other party.

Davis, a seven-term congressman, was the most prominent of the latest wave to quit his post, having served as chairman of the House Republican Campaign Committee, the fourth-ranking leadership position, during the 2000, 2002 and 2004 election campaigns. His seat for the 11th district, in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC, is expected to go to the Democrats, who won a majority of the presidential votes cast in the district in 2004.

The other four retirement announcements include James T. Walsh, a 10-term incumbent from the 25th District of New York, which includes the city of Syracuse; Dave Weldon of Florida, a seven-term incumbent whose 15th District covers a coastal stretch north of Daytona Beach, including the Kennedy Space Center; Kenny Hulshof of the 9th District of Missouri (western suburbs of St. Louis), a six-term incumbent; and Ron Lewis of Kentucky, an eight-term congressman whose 2nd District includes Louisville suburbs and much of the bluegrass agricultural area.

Davis is 59, Walsh 60, Weldon 45, Hulshof 49, Lewis 61 and Weldon 54, so none is leaving because of old age. Nor are there health and family reasons to

explain their exit. Only one, Hulshof, is running for higher office, but this opportunity only arose because the incumbent Republican governor of Missouri, Matt Blunt, is so unpopular that he unexpectedly decided last month not to seek reelection.

Walsh was the only one facing imminent electoral defeat. He narrowly held his seat in 2006, edging out Democrat Dan Maffei by 50.8 percent to 49.2 percent, and faces a rematch with the same candidate, even better financed, and with the local economy in much worse shape. Davis retained his seat with a 55 percent vote, while Weldon and Lewis were considered to have safe seats. Clearly none relished an extended period in the minority in the House.

These resignations demonstrate the growing pessimism in Republican circles over the party's prospects in the congressional elections. In the Senate, narrowly divided by 51-49, the Republicans must defend 22 of the 34 seats up for reelection, and six incumbent Republicans have already announced their retirement, making an expansion of the Democratic majority a virtual certainty.

In the House, the trickle of retirements that began with the resignation of former House Speaker Dennis Hastert has become a flood. Nine months before the election, the number of Republican departures is already only one short of the all-time record, with at least a half dozen other incumbents likely to step down as primary filing deadlines approach. Of the 28 resignations or retirements, at least half are in districts where the resulting race could be highly competitive, including seats in New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

The political significance of these retirements is reflected by the cumulative impact on the House

Republican leadership. Of the ten Republicans who occupied top leadership positions in the House from 1998 to 2006, serving as a spearhead for the right-wing agenda, seven have now departed, including Davis, Hastert, former House Majority Leader Richard Arney, former House Majority Leader and Majority Whip Tom DeLay, former Republican conference chairs Deborah Pryce and J.C. Watts, and former Republican conference secretary John Doolittle of California.

A major factor in the retirements and resignations, perhaps more decisive than the unpopularity of the war in Iraq and the Bush administration and poll numbers showing a likely Republican rout in 2008—at least in the congressional elections—is the shift in the flow of money to the two big business parties.

The most recent fund-raising figures show the House Democratic Campaign Committee ended 2007 with \$35 million in the bank and \$1.3 million in debts. The corresponding Republican committee had only \$5 million in the bank and \$2 million in debts. The scale of the fundraising disparity is such that in many competitive districts, Democratic challengers will be able to outspend Republican incumbents, an exceedingly rare occurrence in recent elections where the Republican Party has collected the lion's share of the donations from corporate PACs and the wealthy.

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