



Election 2008: Senate District 2 at center of struggle for Legislature power

By MIKE DENNISON of the Missoulian State Bureau

HELENA - Voters in northwestern Montana's Senate District 2 probably don't know it, but they're one of the epicenters of an election-year battle to control the Montana Legislature.

They're also not alone in that regard, for the struggle between Republicans and Democrats to gain party control of the Legislature will play out in two dozen key races.

These swing contests, where the incumbent party could lose and thus shift the partisan balance of power in the state House and Senate, are in all corners of the state, from Missoula to Kalispell, from Glasgow to Billings.

No matter who wins, the edge is likely to remain close, as it is now: Democrats hold a 26-24 margin in the Senate, and Republicans hold a 51-49 majority in the House, including a Constitution Party member who generally votes with them.

Control of the Legislature is critical, for it allows the majority party in each house to appoint committee chairs, control the flow of legislation and pass - or kill - the bills that set state policy.

With the primary election over, party officials are concentrating on these races, which will be among some of the hardest-fought elections in Montana this year.

In the state Senate, Republicans believe they have an advantage, because five of the six seats in danger of swinging to the other party are held by Democrats and four of those have no incumbent.

Among them is SD2, which includes Whitefish, Columbia Falls and West Glacier. Incumbent Democratic Sen. Dan Weinberg of Whitefish chose not to run for re-election, and Republicans think retired Navy SEAL Ryan Zinke of Whitefish is a good bet to win.

Zinke, 48, describes himself as a "Teddy Roosevelt Republican" who wants to cut business taxes and support other changes that will help small business flourish in Montana.

"It's going to be a close race, because Senate District 2 is more Democratic than it is Republican," he said. "I consider myself the underdog."

Weinberg won the seat in 2004 by 67 votes out of nearly 9,000 votes cast.

Zinke's Democratic opponent is 38-year-old Brittany MacLean of Whitefish, a widowed mother of four who scored a mild upset in the Democratic primary last Tuesday over Gil Jordan of Coram.

MacLean said she won the primary by talking to hundreds of voters face-to-face about the issues that mattered to them, and plans to continue that strategy in the general election.

“A lot of people have simply given up on politics,” she said. “We're interested in reaching out to a diverse populace.”

MacLean also said she's well aware that the outcome in SD2 could determine political control of the Senate: “That's what we keep hearing ... so we're excited about the race.”

The other Senate swing races are in Billings, northeast Montana, Great Falls and the lower Clark Fork River Valley in far western Montana.

The only one with an incumbent is Senate District 22, which stretches from Billings to Miles City. Farm broadcaster and Republican Taylor Brown is challenging Sen. Lane Larson, D-Billings, in what could be the most expensive race in the state.

In the House, Democrats believe they have the advantage, primarily because they have far fewer swing districts to defend - although they still have to win more than they lose to take control.

Of the 15 or so swing races in the House, two-thirds are held by Republicans. These swing races are statewide, although about half of them are in south-central and northwestern Montana.

Rep. Bob Bergren, D-Havre and a legislative campaign coordinator for Democrats, says a good crop of Democratic candidates should be aided by a high turnout of Democratic voters, sparked by interest in the presidential race and other prominent top-of-the-ticket Democrats on the ballot.

Bergren notes that in many swing districts, Democrats turned out in huge numbers during last Tuesday's primary election, sometimes by a more than 2-to-1 margin over Republicans.

State Republican Chairman Erik Iverson says he's concerned about the turnout numbers, but he's not pushing the panic button.

The presidential primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, who spent thousands of dollars in Montana to get out their voters, inflated the Democratic turnout last week, he said, and more Republicans should turn out this fall for the general election.

“This isn't a sky-is-falling scenario,” Iverson said the day after the election. “Montana didn't all of a sudden slip to a Democratic state overnight.”

Most polls show that Montana remains closely divided politically between those who call themselves Republicans and those who call themselves Democrats, with Republicans still enjoying a slight edge, he said.

Iverson said he saw things “back out to pretty much normal (in the general election) - which means both sides will have to work hard to get their votes out.”

Control for Legislature hinges on key races

HELENA - Party control of the 2009 Montana Legislature usually rests on the outcome in two dozen swing districts that can be won by either Democrats or Republicans. Here's a brief look at 15 of these races:

Senate

Senate District 2 (Whitefish, Columbia Falls, North Fork of Flathead): Democrat Dan Weinberg of Whitefish won this seat in a close race in 2004, but declined to run for re-election. Brittany MacLean, a single mother of four, will attempt to hold the seat for Democrats against Republican Ryan Zinke, a retired Navy SEAL and Iraq war veteran. Both are from Whitefish.

SD7 (Sanders and Mineral counties and the town of Frenchtown): Another open seat, where Democratic Sen. Jim Elliott of Trout Creek cannot run because of term limits. Democrat Paul Clark, a former state legislator from Trout Creek, is facing off against furniture maker Greg Hinkle of Thompson Falls in a district that leans Republican.

SD10 (southern Great Falls and Cascade County): This suburban-rural district pits Democrat Brad Hamlett of Cascade against Republican Jim Whitaker of Great Falls, a former state legislator. Whitaker lost a close race for the seat in 2004 against incumbent Democrat Don Ryan, who can't run again because of term limits. Hamlett ran in 2004 and 2006 for a state House district that makes up half the Senate district, losing narrowly both times.

SD18 (northeastern corner of Montana): Both sides are expecting a tough, expensive race for this open seat now held by Democrat Sam Kitzenberg, who can't run because of term limits. Republican John Brenden of Scobey, a farmer and former state party chairman, is running against Democrat Shirley Baumgartner, the longtime owner of a Glasgow pharmacy.

SD22 (east Billings, Yellowstone Valley, Colstrip): Sen. Lane Larson, D-Billings, will attempt to hold off a strong challenge by Republican Taylor Brown, a well-known farm-and-ranch broadcaster from Huntley. The two candidates together had raised more than \$50,000 by mid-May, attracting contributions from across the state and nation. SD22 is expected to be the most expensive legislative race in the state this year.

SD27 (south Billings): In possibly the only race where Democrats can hope to pick up a Republican seat in the Senate, state Rep. Gary Branae, D-Billings, is running against Republican Jack Sands, an attorney and former state legislator. While the district leans Democratic, it's held now by Republican Corey Stapleton, who can't run again because of term limits.

House

House District 3 (Columbia Falls, West Glacier): Democrat Doug Cordier won this seat in 2006, ending years of Republican control, but he decided not to run for re-election this year. The woman he beat, Republican Dee Brown of Hungry Horse, is trying to reclaim the seat. Her opponent is Democrat Mick Holm of Columbia Falls, a former superintendent of Glacier National Park.

HD8 (Kalispell): Incumbent Republican and restaurant owner Craig Witte of Kalispell won this seat by just 37 votes in 2006, and faces a challenge this year from Democrat Cheryl Steenson, a 27-year-old adjunct professor at Flathead Valley Community College.

HD13 (Sanders County): Republican Rep. Pat Ingraham of Thompson Falls is being challenged by veteran state Sen. Jim Elliott, D-Trout Creek, who is barred by term limits from running for re-election to his Senate seat. Ingraham, a former county official, won her 2006 race by a comfortable margin, but this year's contest could be closer against the well-known Elliott.

HD20 (south Great Falls): Rep. Deb Kottel, D-Great Falls, won by a mere 89 votes in 2006, and faces a Republican opponent, Jack Allen, whom GOP officials believe can give her a good race. Constitution Party candidate Terry Poupa of Great Falls also is in the race.

HD43 (Yellowstone River Valley and Colstrip): This swing district features a matchup between incumbent Republican Rep. Duane Ankney and Democrat Del Dinstel, both of Colstrip. Ankney won the race by 176 votes in 2006, out of 4,200 votes cast.

HD58 (Laurel): Two local veterinarians are squaring off in this district that determined control of the House in 2006. Republican Krayton Kerns won the seat by three votes that year, after a recount, giving Republicans a 50-49 edge in the House for the 2007 Legislature. He's being challenged this year by Democrat Don Woerner. Both are from Laurel.

HD59 (Carbon County): This south-central Montana district features a rematch between Rep. Scott Boggio, a Republican rancher, and Democrat Paul Beck, who lost to Boggio in 2006 by 125 votes. Both are from Red Lodge.

HD63 (Bozeman): This district that includes suburban and rural areas east of Bozeman usually features well-funded candidates and a tight contest, and this year should be no exception. Rep. Jennifer Pommichowski, a Democrat who won by 35 votes in 2006, is facing Republican Thomas Burnett of Bozeman.

HD100 (western Missoula County): Democrats have their eyes on this district, which is the only Republican-held seat in Missoula County. Republican Rep. Bill Nooney is facing a challenge from Democrat Gary Brown. Both are from Missoula.