

House candidates running against party leadership: Golden

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(Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

In a growing sign that traditional party identification and loyalty are weakening under the stress of internal ideological and strategic conflict, this year's mid-term Congressional candidates are being advised to utilize opposition to their party leadership as a central campaign theme.

The ties that have historically bound Republicans and Democrats to their respective parties have frayed badly and, in some cases, unraveled altogether, replaced by a strategy rooted in personality and style.

The late House Speaker Tip O'Neill's trenchant observation — "All politics is local" — has morphed into "All politics is personal."

Republicans are being counseled to avoid close association with President Donald Trump while Democrats see benefit in distancing themselves from their House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

Democrats around the country took notice when one of their own, Conor Lamb, won a special election in a southwestern Pennsylvania congressional district carried by Trump by nearly 20 points by breaking with party orthodoxy on gun control and abortion rights, for instance, and promising he would not support Pelosi for Speaker should Democrats regain control of the House.

The decision by more than 20 House Republicans to retire rather than seek re-election was interpreted as a warning that Trump had become a serious — perhaps fatal — drag on their re-election hopes.

Democrats are also preoccupied by a debilitating struggle over the party's future, attempting to mollify its strident progressive wing who argue the party has lost its philosophical bearings while keeping its more centrist moderate faction calm and united.

Pelosi stands between the jaws of this slowly closing ideological vise, absorbing criticism from both sides and fending off their demands by concentrating attention on Trump and the Republican Congress.

Republicans confront their own demons as they attempt to chart a course between touting the federal tax cut legislation and an expanding economy and job market and explaining an Administration beset by turmoil and chaos.

Trump and Pelosi have become evil twins, campaign flash points who arouse emotional responses blotting out efforts to drive a coherent, credible message to voters.

Even in an occupation in which hyperbole and exaggeration have become the norm, Trump and Pelosi have raised the bar.

The president has spent nearly his entire time in office tweeting demonstrably false over the top commentary while Pelosi has delivered such cringe worthy comments as warning that the tax reform/tax cut legislation would lead to Armageddon and the end of western civilization.

She followed by cementing her reputation as out of touch by characterizing \$1,000 bonuses awarded to millions of American workers as "crumbs." Presumably, the condescension and hypocrisy of her remark never occurred to her.

Her San Francisco-style liberalism grates on Democrats running in suddenly competitive congressional districts and who rightly fear their association with her and her snobbery will sink their chances.

The party was not helped, either, by the recent diatribe from Hillary Clinton who, on a trip to India, attributed her loss to Trump to the backward bigoted people who inhabit that swath of the country between the Northeast and the West Coast.

Whether Pelosi shares Clinton's rationale is irrelevant. Both represent the party leadership and are responsible for its tone, direction and future. Insulting millions of voters they desperately need if their hopes of a Congressional majority are to be fulfilled is hardly a brilliant strategy.

Republicans fear being singed by the flames of uproar and turbulence which have beset the White House from the outset.

The executive office seems in need of revolving doors to deal with staff upheavals, resignations and firings. The president routinely laces into members of his cabinet and advisers, tossing out hints of even more changes to come in an administration which has established a dubious record for turnover.

Moreover, the special counsel investigation into allegations of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian agents drags on, as does the soap opera of the President's alleged dalliance with a porn film actress more than 10 years ago.

It is small wonder that congressional candidates are ditching their party affiliations, breaking with leadership and establishing their own identities.

It's unlikely the current environment will reach a point at which the traditional two-party system dissolves, opening a path for new political forces or viable third-party candidates.

It is, however, a clear indication that, at a time when the American people are fed up with posturing and frustrated at a lack of progress, neither party can continue to rely on unwavering loyalty.

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