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KELLEN WASHINGTON REPORT

THE HOME STRETCH

With just over a week to go before the election, the consensus of pollsters and analysts is that the Republicans will win the House with a gain of approximately 52 seats, but will fall just short of the 10 seats needed to win control of the Senate.

The latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll shows that among likely voters, Republicans hold a 50 percent to 43 percent edge, up from a three percentage point lead a month ago.

The poll also shows that Democrats have gained ground in some states and districts as a result of their strong anti-GOP offensive in recent weeks, and that President Obama's personal campaigning is having an impact in energizing the Democratic base.

In the battleground Midwest, for example, Democrats now lead 47 percent to 42 percent among registered voters, a reversal since August.

But while Democratic chances have improved in some places, they have deteriorated in others, making any sweeping generalizations difficult, notes analyst Charlie Cook. His bottom line: GOP gains will be roughly comparable to 1994, when the party picked up 52 House seats and eight Senate seats.

A KINDER, GENTLER CONGRESS?

Some Republican leaders are saying that if they recapture the House, they will seek a new strategy of cooperation with Democrats in the hope of passing meaningful legislation and strengthening their credibility with voters. According to the Wall Street Journal, the Republicans acknowledge that compromise may be difficult after an especially bruising election season, and will depend heavily on the willingness of Democrats to work with them. But they believe it is worth trying.

"It's pretty clear the American people expect us to use the existing gridlock to create compromise and advance their agenda," according to Republican House member Darrell Issa of California. "They want us to come together."

Many of the Republican candidates for the House expected to win election next week have prior political experience of working with Democrats, which is thought likely to augur well for the new strategy. Five are former members of Congress and many are relatively mainstream state legislators.

The new Republican members of the Senate are expected to be less inclined to compromise. The latest Zogby poll, meanwhile, found that 74 percent of likely voters do not expect Republicans to seek compromises with the Obama administration.

POTENTIAL RECOUNTS

Polls show that at least a half-dozen Senate races and as many as 30 House contests are still too close to call, meaning that on November 3 the country could have several recounts on its hands, with no final decision for weeks and perhaps months, according to the Washington Post, which notes that the parties are already mobilizing their volunteers – and lawyers.

Where are the recounts most likely to occur? Here are the Post's predictions:

Nevada

Senate majority leader **Harry Reid** (D) and former state assemblywoman **Sharron Angle** (R) are tied at 45.4 percent.

Florida

The governor's race has former health-care executive **Rick Scott** (R) at 45 percent in the polls and state chief financial officer **Alex Sink** (D) at 44 percent.

Illinois

Rep. **Mark Kirk** (R) and state treasurer **Alexi Glannoulis** (D) are neck-and-neck for President Obama's old Senate seat.

Alaska

Sen. **Lisa Murkowski**, who lost the Republican primary to conservative lawyer and Gulf War vet **Joe Miller**, is hoping to win back her seat through a well funded write-in campaign. It's a three-way race with Democrat **Scott McAdams**, mayor of Sitka.

Colorado

Sen. **Michael Bennet** (D), running for his first full-term, faces a strong challenge from Weld county district attorney **Ken Buck** (R).

Washington

In Washington's unpredictable 3rd District, two well-regarded state legislators, **Jaime Herrera** (R) and **Denny Heck** (D), are virtually tied in a contest which may not be immediately decided, even if there is no recount, because of the state's painfully slow process for counting mail-in ballots.

FEDERAL WORKERS' PAY QUESTIONED

A new survey by the Washington Post shows that Americans are as disenchanted with the country's 1.9 million federal workers as they are with their political bosses.

More than half of all Americans consider that federal workers are overpaid for the work they do and do not work as hard as employees at private companies, according to the poll.

The negative views of federal workers – expressed most strongly by Republicans – echo the anti-Washington sentiment roiling the midterm elections, “in what has become a bitter debate over the size and value of the federal bureaucracy,” the paper notes.

Republican leaders, who expect to have more control over Congress next year, have vowed to freeze proposed pay raises for federal workers and fire workers who owe federal taxes. Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), the House minority whip, said his party’s negative views of the workforce are rooted in the recession. “Folks in the private sector feel that they are on the receiving end of a very tough economy (while) federal employees enjoy job security irrespective of the recession.”

Government personnel officials say it is hard to compare average public and private salaries, since so many jobs outside government are in low-paying service industries, whereas government workers tend to be more skilled. They are also highly unionized.

FACTOID: The private sector has lost over 7,700,000 net jobs since the summer of 2007. State and local governments have lost 70,000. The final jobs report before the election showed the nation’s unemployment rate unchanged at 9.6 percent.

TOWARD SAFER HOLIDAY TRAVEL

Just in time for this year’s holiday travel, new requirements have gone into effect to help keep us all safer in the air. Travel policy expert Arthur B. Sackler notes that by November 1, providing so called “Secure Flight Personal Data” – full name, gender and date of birth – will be necessary in order for any air traveler to receive a boarding pass.

“Secure Flight” is the government’s name for its program taking over responsibility for running the Transportation Security Administration, responsible for Secure Flight, to more precisely match names with those on the watch lists. This will both improve our alertness to potentially dangerous fliers and reduce false positives – and the unnecessary hassle that comes with them – for passengers who have the same name or might otherwise have been confused with someone on the lists.

ELECTIONS AND POTATO CHIPS

Should we worry about the increasing amounts being spent on elections, as some pundits insist? According to current estimates, total spending by all parties, campaigns and issue-advocacy groups, for every office from county clerks to US senators, could reach a total of \$4.2 billion in this two-year election cycle, an average of \$2.1 billion a year.

In a recent column, George Will provided some comparative figures to put this spending in perspective. For example, he noted that we spend almost twice as much on yogurt each year as we spend on elections – approximately \$4 billion. And we spend much more than that on candy and such items as potato chips. He did not give the figure for candy, but noted that we spend over \$7 billion a year on potato chips alone.

“Is it really worrisome,” he asked, “that Americans spend on political advocacy – on determining who should make and administer our laws – much less than we spend on potato chips?”