

JULY 14, 2008 POLITICS / JOHN MAGINNIS

National Stakes High in Senate Election

Though Louisiana does not figure to be a battleground state in the presidential election, its closely contested Senate race will be in the cross-hairs of both parties and of various outside political groups that will weigh in with their own media ads this fall.

That Sen. Mary Landrieu is considered to be the most vulnerable Democratic incumbent and the Republicans' best--some say only--target to turn a Senate seat shows how dire prospects are for the GOP this year. With several vulnerable incumbents of their own to defend, Republicans could sink deeper into the minority if they don't win in Louisiana.

While polls and her electoral history suggest that Landrieu is beatable, she shows more strength than one normally attributes to the vulnerable. In a recent Southern Media poll, 61 percent of respondents had a "favorable impression" of Landrieu and she led Treasurer John Kennedy, 46-40 percent, in a trial heat. (The other Republican candidate, unknown Jacques Boudreaux, will be barely a speed bump for the party-endorsed Kennedy in the Sept. 6 closed primary.)

Yet Kennedy's favorable rating matches Landrieu's, while his unfavorable rating is only 10 percent to her 34 percent. Fewer voters know him compared to the senator, so he has room to grow.

Geographically, the state is cleanly split between the two in the poll. Landrieu dominates in the New Orleans metro area and leads comfortably in Baton Rouge metro and the bayou and river regions. Kennedy is clearly ahead in North Louisiana and Acadiana/Southwest.

In other numbers that count, the senator holds a 2-1 lead over the challenger in their campaign bank accounts.

Still, the key numbers of the survey are that four months before the election both candidates are in the 40s. That puts the incumbent in a danger zone and the challenger within striking distance.

It does not look so close on the ground, where Landrieu has been crisscrossing the state announcing government grants and accepting the endorsements of local politicians. She has made impressive inroads in the GOP strongholds of Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes, where Republican elected officials laud her recovery efforts, and among business contributors who value her seniority in a largely junior delegation.

Instead of on the campaign trail, Kennedy spent the first half of the year where he could do himself the most good, on the phone raising money. Now that he's taken to the streets, he is just starting to take the fight to Landrieu.

As has been pointed out, the two are pursuing campaign themes the opposite of their national counterparts. Kennedy trumpets Barack Obama's message of fundamental change, while Landrieu, like John McCain, stresses her experience and effectiveness.

The irony of the change candidate is not lost of those who remember Kennedy in his 2004 Senate

campaign as a populist Democrat, who criticized eventual winner David Vitter as a lackey of the Bush administration.

Vitter and Kennedy since patched things up and became strong allies, though the junior senator's public scandal from last year limits what good he can do for his friend now. So too for what help Gov. Bobby Jindal can lend, after his own popularity tumbled from the legislative pay raise fiasco. In the Southern Media poll, neither was as popular as the lesser-known Kennedy.

Yet the challenger has a strong political partner where it matters most, at the top of the November ballot.

With polls spotting McCain a double-digit lead in Louisiana, Kennedy is wisely trying to nationalize the Senate election. He has criticized Landrieu's endorsement of Obama, whom he says embodies the liberalism of old Europe (though that's not the continent many white voters have in mind regarding the Democrat).

"The choice is between Kennedy-McCain and Obama-Landrieu," Kennedy pronounced. "Nobody is going to be confused about that."

Confused or not, a sizable number of poll respondents indicate they don't mind having McCain in the White House and Landrieu back on the Appropriations Committee. It's not unusual for Louisiana Democrats to cross party lines in presidential races and to cross back again in elections closer to home. That's where Mary Landrieu, despite the potential impact of the Senate election on Washington, hopes to keep this campaign focused.