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For Democrats, Even 'Safe' Seats Are Shaky

By JEFF ZELENY

ST. CLAIRSVILLE, Ohio — Republicans are expanding the battle for the House into districts that Democrats had once considered relatively safe, while Democrats began a strategy of triage on Monday to fortify candidates who they believe stand the best chance of survival.

As Republicans made new investments in at least 10 races across the country, including two Democratic seats here in eastern Ohio, Democratic leaders took steps to pull out of some races entirely or significantly cut their financial commitment in several districts that the party won in the last two election cycles.

Representatives Steve Driehaus of Ohio, Suzanne M. Kosmas of Florida and Kathy Dahlkemper of Pennsylvania were among the Democrats who learned that they would no longer receive the same infusion of television advertising that party leaders had promised. Party strategists conceded that these races and several others were slipping out of reach.

With three weeks remaining to save its majority, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has increased its spending on two New York races, along with at-risk seats in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky and Massachusetts, setting up a map of competitive districts that is starkly different from when the campaign began.

The strategic decisions unfolded at a feverish pace on Monday over an unusually wide playing field of nearly 75 Congressional districts, including here in Ohio, a main battleground in the fight for the House and the Senate. The developments resembled pieces being moved on a giant chess board, with Republicans trying to keep Democrats on the defensive in as many places as possible, while outside groups provided substantial reinforcements for Republicans.

The National Republican Congressional Committee, the party's election arm in the House, can afford to make the new investments because the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a host of newly formed political organizations have come to the aid of Republican candidates who have far less money than the Democratic incumbents.

Here in St. Clairsville, an Appalachian town on the eastern edge of Ohio, the new investments by Republican groups have become apparent in recent days. Television and radio advertisements are aimed at Representatives Charlie Wilson and Zack Space, both Democrats who were elected in 2006, while new pieces of literature tying the men to [President Obama](#) and the House speaker, [Nancy Pelosi](#), are arriving in the mail.

The two districts, which come together like long and jagged pieces of a puzzle, are among Ohio's most rural and conservative. Yet even though Senator [John McCain](#) carried the region over Mr. Obama in the 2008 presidential race, Republican leaders had initially decided against making major investments because they believed there were greater opportunities elsewhere in the state and because both congressmen had strong connections to the area.

But polls taken for their Republican candidates showed steady signs of promise, party officials said, so over the weekend the national party made an initial expenditure of \$350,000 on television commercials in both districts. Democratic strategists believe that the spending is either designed to be a head fake, so they are drawn into spending money on the races, or a signal to outside groups, who are prohibited from coordinating with the party, to begin making their own forays into the contests.

For months, [Bill Johnson](#), the Republican challenger to Mr. Wilson, has drawn little notice and has

struggled to raise money. But last week, things began to change.

He was invited to be the guest speaker at a weekly meeting of conservative leaders in Washington that is organized by [Grover Norquist](#), the president of [Americans for Tax Reform](#). Then he appeared on G. Gordon Liddy's radio show, which he said helped his fund-raising efforts, as did an endorsement from [Sarah Palin](#).

"It is a good year to be running as a Republican," Mr. Johnson said in an interview on Monday as he drove across the sprawling Sixth District, which stretches 325 miles across 12 counties. "People are concerned about rising unemployment, spending and the overreaching of the federal government."

Mr. Johnson, a businessman and retired Air Force officer, has been largely ignored by Mr. Wilson. He has criticized Mr. Wilson for declining to agree to debates. But the race gained attention over the weekend when the Republican committee's advertisements began appearing on television, calling Mr. Wilson "party line Charlie" and highlighting his votes in favor of the economic stimulus and health care measures.

The message was amplified in a radio advertisement playing on a country music station here, with Mr. Johnson saying in a chipper voice: "On Election Day, it's time we say, 'So long, Charlie!'"

The race is springing to life here just as early voting is entering its second full week. Campaign signs for Mr. Johnson and Mr. Wilson can be found in equal measure in Ohio River towns from Bridgeport to Brilliant to Bellaire.

Mr. Wilson, who through a spokeswoman declined an interview on Monday because he was meeting with newspaper editorial boards in his district, has begun striking back. He argues in his own television advertisements that he stood up to [Democratic Party](#) leaders on [climate change legislation](#), which he calls an "energy tax," before closing with a line, "I'm Charlie Wilson, and I'm fed up."

The outcome of these Ohio races, along with other contests in the newly expanded Republican

battleground, will help determine whether projections of a Republican wave are realized. Democrats dismissed the notion that Republicans were actually expanding the playing field, suggesting that they were looking for new opportunities because efforts to knock out Democratic incumbents have proved difficult.

Ed Good, the chairman of the Belmont County Democratic Party here in St. Clairsville, said voters were angry and frustrated and eager to “shoot the messenger, if you will.” A [Tea Party](#) rally is scheduled for Thursday on the steps of the courthouse, the latest in a string of events that suggests the political forces may be different for Democrats this year.

“They are going to try to pick off what they think is low-hanging fruit,” Mr. Good said. “But the only way Charlie or Zack can lose is if our party does not get out and vote.”



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