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Republicans Seek Democratic Seats on McCain Turf

By JEFF ZELENY

MEDINA, Ohio — Of all the veins Republicans hope to mine to win seats they need to recapture the House, one may be particularly rich: Democratic seats from districts that picked John McCain over Barack Obama in the last presidential race.

These split districts are scattered across the country, a total of 48 from Alabama to Arizona where Democrats were elected not on the coattails of Mr. Obama, but in spite of opposition to him. Republicans, needing a net gain of 39 for a majority in the House, are redoubling their efforts to win these seats, hoping to link Democrats to the president and his policies.

For 58 years, voters here in Ohio's 16th Congressional District sent Republicans to Washington, a streak that was interrupted in 2008 when John Boccieri, a state senator who flew cargo planes in Iraq as a member of the Air Force Reserve, was elected.

He outperformed Mr. Obama by seven percentage points, but how voters react to his and other Democrats' support for three administration priorities — the economic stimulus, the health care overhaul and climate change legislation — will help determine whether they can survive the fierce headwinds facing the Democratic Party.

"This is a strong conservative district," said Mr. Boccieri's Republican challenger, Jim Renacci, pausing for a moment as he mingled with voters on a recent night at the Medina County Fair. "I really think we need to have somebody representing the district other than Nancy Pelosi."

When Mr. Obama was elected, 49 Democratic lawmakers represented districts carried by Mr. McCain. Soon, Representative Parker Griffith of Alabama left the party to become a Republican,

but he was defeated in the primary earlier this year.

Then, eight of the Democrats decided not to run for re-election, giving Republicans a good shot at picking up those open seats. Now there are 40 Democratic incumbents remaining in districts won by Mr. McCain.

There are multiple combinations for how Republicans can reach the gain needed to win control of the House, but neither side disputes the notion that for Republicans to be successful, some of their victories must come from these split districts.

They are by no means all easy targets for Republicans. For a variety of factors, including fund-raising strength and the quality and ideological positioning of the Republican candidates, only 15 of the 40 districts are considered top targets by the National Republican Congressional Committee. Several others are rated competitive by nonpartisan analysts.

At least a handful of Democrats in the 40 districts are no longer considered to be as vulnerable as Republicans had hoped, largely because their preferred candidates were defeated by more conservative candidates in primaries.

Representatives Jason Altmire of Pennsylvania, Walt Minnick of Idaho and Zack Space of Ohio are among the Democrats no longer seen by Republicans as easy targets.

While Mr. Bocchieri supported Mr. Obama on health care, economic stimulus and cap-and-trade climate legislation, other Democrats voted against one, two or even all three of the measures — meaning Republicans cannot use a single line of attack against them.

Democrats take solace in the fact that of the party's three Ohio lawmakers who come from districts where Mr. Obama lost to Mr. McCain, only Mr. Bocchieri has a fiercely competitive race. Representative Charlie Wilson, along with Mr. Space, also is not included among the top Republican targets.

Here in the 16th Congressional District, the race between Mr. Bocchieri and Mr. Renacci has already become a highly contentious one. The district, which stretches across four counties, includes Stark County and Canton, the home of President William McKinley, a Republican.

Mr. Renacci's strategy is to tie Mr. Bocchieri to Mr. Obama and Ms. Pelosi, the House speaker,

who is often portrayed by Republican candidates as the embodiment of liberalism run amok. Mr. Bocchieri flatly rejects the assertion that he is a puppet of Ms. Pelosi, and he said Mr. Renacci would favor returning to an agenda that Republicans put forward while President George W. Bush was in office.

“People are mad at Democrats, but they’re still mad as hell at Republicans,” Mr. Bocchieri said. “I am not ashamed of any of those votes that I’ve taken.”

When people ask Mr. Bocchieri about his opponent’s assertion that he is a reliable vote for Ms. Pelosi and the Democratic Party, he has a statistic at the ready: he says he sided with Republicans 847 times out of 1,464 votes he took in his first term in Congress. The Almanac of American Politics ranked Mr. Bocchieri as the 224th most liberal and the 204th most conservative member of Congress.

“I’ve staked out one of the loneliest places in Washington,” he said. “But I’m in a quintessential swing district in a quintessential swing state, and that makes me a target.”

Democrats sent researchers to investigate the business background of Mr. Renacci, who owned nursing homes and a car dealership and had a stake in the Columbus Destroyers, an arena football team. Four years ago, court records show, he was assessed nearly \$1.4 million in unpaid state taxes, interest and fees, which he ultimately paid.

Mr. Renacci said his business record was far less important to voters than Mr. Bocchieri’s record in Congress.

“People understand the tax situation — it’s 30 years of business, 30 years of employing people,” Mr. Renacci said. “Every time he brings it up, I’m going to keep asking him, how about your cap-and-trade vote? How about your health care vote?”

Mr. Renacci raised more money than Mr. Bocchieri in the second quarter of the year, but Mr. Bocchieri had \$1.06 million on hand, compared with \$662,612 for Mr. Renacci, who also had a four-way primary to contend with. Mr. Renacci, who reported in House disclosure forms that he had a net worth of at least \$35 million, has lent his campaign \$200,000 and said he would not rule out investing more money in the race.

While the district is made up of small and medium-size towns, from River Styx (population

655) to Canton (78,000), it is part of the Cleveland television market, where it is expensive for Congressional candidates to place advertisements.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has already reserved time for the final weeks of the campaign to run commercials on behalf of Mr. Bocchieri.

The campaign literature for Mr. Bocchieri, which volunteers were handing out last week at the Medina County Fair, does not mention votes that he has taken on health care, the economic stimulus or energy legislation. The word Democrat also does not appear on his brochures.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.