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May 30, 2011

Surprise Victory in New York Invigorates Democrats Looking to 2012

By CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON — Sal Pace, the Democratic leader of the State House in Colorado, was already preparing to run for Congress in a district captured by Republicans last year, but his party's special election victory last week in a conservative district in upstate New York made the decision all the easier.

“The New York race confirmed what I thought citizens would feel about [Medicare](#),” said Mr. Pace, who is expecting to soon begin a campaign to oust Representative Scott Tipton, a freshman Republican, in southwestern Colorado. “People are very hesitant to end Medicare as we know it.”

In the aftermath of the New York victory, which hinged on a Republican plan to reshape the health care program for older Americans, members of both parties and independent analysts now predict a more competitive race next year for control of the House, with expanded opportunities for Democrats to reclaim seats they lost in the Republican wave of 2010.

“No one believes that 2012 will be the same type of election for Republicans with the wind at our back,” said Tom Reynolds, a former New York congressman who ran the [Republican Party's](#) House campaign effort in 2004 and 2006. “Neither will it be '08 or '06 with the wind in our face. Republican office

holders will have to go out and explain what the problem is and what they are trying to do to fix it.”

Buoyed by the New York surprise and bolstered by the prospect of a larger and friendlier electorate in a year when President Obama will be running, House Democrats say they can argue credibly that they are poised to cut into the Republican majority, though they were careful not to predict a takeover, which would require a gain of 24 seats.

“Democrats can win the House back in 2012,” said Representative Steve Israel of New York, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. “I’m not saying we will — yet.”

As the case of Mr. Pace and other experienced contenders who are entering races in districts in Illinois, Washington, Wisconsin and elsewhere shows, the victory in New York can help prospective candidates make their run-or-not decision while opening the wallets of contributors uncertain about giving if there was no hope of party gain.

“It is a sign of the pendulum swinging back the other way,” said Brad Schneider, an Illinois businessman who announced last Wednesday that he would be among the Democrats running in a Republican-held district in the suburbs north of Chicago.

But Republicans remain confident that they can protect their hold on the House, suggesting that Democrats are exaggerating the meaning of the outcome in the New York race. “The hubris on their side is ever-expanding,” said Guy Harrison, executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

And major questions still surround the 2012 House landscape, since new Congressional district lines have not been completed in most states, including such crucial battlegrounds as California, Florida, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas.

Republicans control the redistricting power in most of the states, giving them the potential to erect a firewall against substantial Democratic gains.

“The redistricting process provides a degree of protection for House Republicans against any potential losses,” said Jonathan Collegio, a spokesman for American Crossroads, the pro-Republican group that spent \$690,000 in the unsuccessful effort to hold on to the House seat in New York’s 26th Congressional District.

One exception is Illinois, where a new proposed map gives significant advantages to Democrats in efforts to knock off Republicans.

But the victory in New York was galvanizing for Democrats, and for now at least has given them confidence that they can use Medicare to press their broader case that Republicans are going too far in their drive to cut spending and reduce the reach of government while continuing to provide tax breaks for the wealthy. Democrats intend to seize on that issue, which could help them recapture older voters, who rallied to Republicans in the last election.

“Democrats have a message that they are going to use from now until Election Day,” said Stuart Rothenberg, a nonpartisan Congressional analyst. “It is a weapon they didn’t have three or four months ago.”

But Mr. Harrison, the Republican House strategist, and others say Republicans will counter the Democratic attack by offering the argument that without changes, Medicare will become insolvent.

“We are going to talk about the fact that they bankrupt Medicare,” Mr. Harrison said. “In that framework, we have the facts on our side.”

The Democratic argument against the Republican position on Medicare could also be undercut if the White House and Congressional Democrats and Republicans reach agreement on a deal to raise the [national debt ceiling](#) that includes substantial steps to rein in the growth of Medicare.

Democrats say the Medicare plan is just one element of an emerging campaign message that will help them topple Republicans as they try to tie the Medicare overhaul to other elements of the conservative agenda being pursued by the House majority.

“Medicare is part of a narrative that voters are beginning to understand and solidify in their own minds,” said Alexandria Lapp, who is running a new independent political action committee, House Majority PAC, aiding Democrats. “Republicans are putting together a budget and policies that ask only some Americans to sacrifice. It is fundamentally unfair.”

A hint of where Democrats see their potential 2012 openings can be gleaned from the Republicans who were singled out in radio attack advertisements paid for by Ms. Lapp’s organization, which spent more than \$300,000 in the New York race.

After the House budget vote in April, the group went after 10 freshmen Republicans in potential swing districts, including Representatives Paul Gosar of Arizona, Allen B. West of Florida, Chip Cravaack of Minnesota, Ann Marie Buerkle of New York and Sean P. Duffy of Wisconsin.

Depending on how redistricting goes, Democrats also see opportunities for gains in Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York and Texas as well as other states.

Democrats say they do not intend to rely solely on the fight over Medicare to carry their candidates, with Mr. Israel noting that the victory in New York’s 26th district “will inform our strategy; it will not be our strategy.”

“We are not going to get cocky out of New York 26,” he said. “It was a shot in the arm, but it does not define the 2012 election.”



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