How To Vote

Some of Congress' biggest AIDS foes (and friends) may go down to defeat at the polls this fall. Doug Ireland reports on the races where your lever-pulling counts most.

September 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

The congressional elections are almost upon us—our biennial exercise in what passes for democracy, in which money and incumbency determine the outcome in most races. Too frequently, the system only regurgitates a choice between the mediocre and the simply dreadful. But this November, voters in several states have a real chance to terminate some of the most objectionable carriers of those inextricably linked diseases: homo- and AIDSphobia.

According to the National Com-mittee for an Effective Congress, the leading liberal political action committee, there are only 38 (out of 435) House seats likely to change hands this year. AIDSphobes among the vulnerables (all Republicans): Indiana's John Hostettler; Kentucky's Edward Whitfield and Ernie Fletcher; Louisiana's Richard Baker; New Mexico's Heather Wilson and Joe Skeen; Utah's Merrill Cook and Washington's George Nethercutt. PWA-friendly House members are generally Democrats with safe seats. Two key exceptions, both first-termers: Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin, the open lesbian who is a special target of national right-wing money, and New Jersey's Rush Holt, a scientist supportive of AIDS programs who will have a tough time hanging on against conservative GOPer (and ex-Rep.) Dick Zimmer.

On the Senate side, Missouri's John Ashcroft, a two-termer who last year sought Christian-right backing in his abortive bid for the GOP presidential nomination, tops the list of truly objectionable vulnerable incumbents. He got a 100 percent legislative scorecard for his voting record in the current Congress from the ayatollahs of the Christian Coalition, and opposes what he calls "special rights" for gay people. He voted for a failed Jesse Helms amendment to Ryan White funding in 1996 that would have banned "directly or indirectly" promoting homosexuality—a provision that would have destroyed much meaningful safe-sex education. His opponent, popular Gov. Mel Carnahan, is a generally progressive Democrat who supports increased Ryan White funding and signed a state ban on antigay and anti-AIDS discrimination.

Minnesota GOP Sen. Rod Grams has also been a leading spear-carrier for the Christian right. At press time, his Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party opponent had yet to be chosen, but the leading contenders are all liberals who would be a vast improvement on Grams.

Freshman Pennsylvania GOP Sen. Rick Santorum has also had a 100 percent Christian Coalition

voting record. Over the years, he has voted to ban HIVer immigration and to defund local agencies in cities that have domestic-partnership medical benefits, while proclaiming his “outrage” at laws to protect same-sexers who “flaunt God’s moral code.” Unfortunately, his Democratic challenger, Rep. Ron Klink, is a “pro-life” homophobe who has voted against funding for both needle exchange and the Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS (HOPWA) program. Klink would be only marginally better on AIDS issues than Santorum, so hold your nose and pull his lever.

Special-mention Senate race: Centrist Democratic Rep. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, with a 100 percent AIDS Action voting record, is running neck and neck in the polls with first-term GOP Sen. Spence Abraham, a conservative ideologue with a 40 percent AIDS Action legislative score for 1997–98 (the last years for which this sluggish group has bothered to compile stats).

Two GOP nonincumbents richly deserve defeat. In Nevada, ex-Rep. John Ensign is seeking an open Democratic seat; this raving right-winger has a 100 percent Christian Coalition score. He’s leading in the polls against Democrat Ed Bernstein, a liberal (by Nevada standards) trial lawyer who’s been silent so far on AIDS but is a pharmaceutical industry critic and supports gay civil rights.

And in New Mexico, third-term centrist Democratic Sen. Jeff Bingaman—who has an 80 percent AIDS Action score—is opposed by GOP ex-Rep. Bill Redmond, another froth-at-the-mouth reactionary who opposed HOPWA funding; he’s also a fundamentalist preacher who campaigned in support of an antigay ballot initiative in 1994.

Finally, there’s the New York Senate race between Hillary Clinton and GOP Rep. Rick Lazio. Lazio is credited by the New York City AIDS service organization Housing Works with devising the compromise that saved HOPWA funding. He has a 60 percent AIDS Action record, voting against both needle-exchange programs and the Patients’ Bill of Rights, which contained medical privacy protections for people with AIDS. A request to Clinton’s campaign for her positions on AIDS issues went unanswered. She has preached sexual abstinence and boasted she would have voted for the homophobic Defense of Marriage Act (issues on which she agrees with Lazio), and her failed health care plan would have been a boon to the scandal-plagued HMO industry. I’ve always had Clinton down as a corporate pimp and hypocrite who believes in nothing. This isn’t much of a choice, so personally I’m protest-voting for the yet-to-be-determined Green candidate (the party has an excellent AIDS platform). For, as novelist Henry James once said to the legendary muckraker Ida Tarbell, “You should cherish your contempts.”

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