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## New Hope for Democrats in Bid for Senate

By [ROBIN TONER](#)

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 — Six weeks before Election Day, the [Democrats](#) suddenly face a map with unexpected opportunities in their battle for control of the Senate.

In Virginia, a state that few expected to be seriously competitive, [Senator George Allen](#) looks newly vulnerable after a series of controversies over charges of racial insensitivity, strategists in both parties say. In Tennessee, another Southern state long considered safely red, Representative Harold E. Ford Jr., a Democrat, has run a strong campaign that has kept that state in contention.

Elsewhere, Democratic challengers are either ahead or close in races in five states held by the [Republicans](#): Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, according to political strategists in both parties and the latest polls.

All of these races could shift direction in a matter of days, let alone six weeks, and Republicans are counting on their superior finances and large blocks of television advertising to hold the line. Democrats also have their own vulnerabilities, particularly in New Jersey, where Senator [Robert Menendez](#) is in a tight race with his Republican challenger, State Senator Thomas H. Kean Jr., according to recent polls.

Democrats must win six Republican seats to regain a Senate majority, meaning they would have to win nearly every close race. Even the most optimistic Democrats acknowledge that such a feat would require a big anti-Republican wave, a lot of money and a lot of luck.

Still, a shift in the Senate was always considered a long shot this year. Some analysts now say, however, that there are enough Republican seats facing serious challenges to make it at least plausible.

“There’s a big difference in talking about six seats in play and not five,” said Stuart Rothenberg, an independent analyst.

In Pennsylvania, [Rick Santorum](#), the No. 3 Republican in the Senate, has been lagging behind Bob Casey, the state treasurer, for months. In Rhode Island, Senator [Lincoln Chafee](#), a Republican, overcame his primary challenge, but remains locked in a tight race with Sheldon Whitehouse, the Democrat and former state attorney general.

Senator Mike Dewine, Republican of Ohio, is fighting an unhappy political mood in his state, stoked by local Republican scandals and economic unease. Independent polls suggest Mr. Dewine remains in a tight race with his Democratic challenger, Representative Sherrod Brown.

In Montana, Senator Conrad Burns, the Republican, has been considered vulnerable for months to his Democratic challenger, Jon Tester, a farmer and state senator. And any route to a majority for the Democrats would have to include Missouri, where Senator Jim Talent, the Republican, is being challenged by Claire McCaskill, the state auditor.

Republicans' hopes for a pickup look strongest, at the moment, in New Jersey. But another target is the open Democratic seat in Maryland, where Lt. Gov. Michael Steele is running against Representative Benjamin L. Cardin, a Democrat still trying to unify his party after a competitive primary campaign.

Republican strategists acknowledge the intensely competitive map but say they are ready for it.

"Anybody who says there's no way the Democrats could regain control of the Senate, that's just wishful thinking," said Glen Bolger, a Republican pollster active in numerous House and Senate races. "But there's a long way between could and would, and the Republican resource advantage is just now coming to bear."

Democrats are upbeat but wary.

Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, said: "We will pick up seats. And if the stars continue to align, we can take back the Senate."

Republicans say they have the money not only to defend their seats, but also to put Democrats on the defensive in Maryland, New Jersey and elsewhere.

"We obviously knew all along many of our Republicans were going to have difficult races, and they've known that as well, which is why they have more resources than their counterparts and are able to push back," said Brian Nick, spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

Republican Senate candidates are getting a major boost from the [Republican National Committee](#), which is financing an advertising campaign so far focused largely on Missouri, Ohio and Tennessee. This is widely viewed as a firewall strategy: If Republicans hold onto even one of those seats, it stymies the Democrats' hopes of regaining a majority.

Mr. Schumer said, "The 800-pound gorilla is the money the R.N.C. is pouring into those races."

Republicans also argue that six weeks out, many voters are only beginning to pay attention. In Tennessee, for example, Ben Mitchell, campaign manager for the Republican Senate candidate, former Mayor Bob Corker of Chattanooga, said voters would reject Mr. Ford when they learned about his voting record, which Republicans assert is at odds with his centrist image.

Pete Brodnitz, a pollster for Mr. Ford, countered that Tennessee voters had a "big appetite for change."

Perhaps the most unexpected development this year is the competition in two Southern states. Democrats have fared poorly in the South in recent years, which has accounted, in large part, for their difficulty in gaining a Senate majority.

Tennessee, where the seat is held by the retiring majority leader, [Bill Frist](#), is drawing intense interest from national Republicans. President Bush was in Memphis on Wednesday to raise money for Mr. Corker.

The Virginia race — between Mr. Allen and Jim Webb, the Democrat — looked safe for the Republicans until Mr. Allen made a demeaning reference to a young American man of Indian descent — a Webb campaign worker — at a rally in August. Then, last week, Mr. Allen reacted angrily to a reporter's question about whether his mother had been born Jewish, which began another distracting episode for his campaign.

This week, he has faced accusations that he used racist slurs in the 1970's and 1980's — allegations that Mr. Allen has flatly denied.

This week, Mr. Allen's campaign manager, Dick Wadhams, described the race as "competitive," but asserted that would change as it became clear that Mr. Webb "stands with [John Kerry](#), [Ted Kennedy](#), Chuck Schumer and [Hillary Clinton](#)."

Steve Jarding, an adviser to Mr. Webb, described the race as a dead heat, and said that while Mr. Allen retained a financial advantage, Mr. Webb's fund-raising had soared of late.

Both parties are watching to see if Mr. Webb can take advantage of his new opening.

Analysts say the level of Senate competition should come as no surprise; Senate races are more likely to reflect national trends, they say, whereas most House districts are so carefully drawn on partisan lines that "they are safe against anything but a hurricane," said Gary C. Jacobson, a political scientist at the [University of California](#), San Diego.

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