The elections are coming: What will happen?

By Janet Kopenhaver

Part I — The Senate

This column begins a three-part series on the upcoming Nov. 4 elections and what we can expect after the results are in. This week we will look at what’s ahead for the Senate, next the House of Representatives and finally a look at the presidential race.

The Senate

First let us review the Senate breakdown and math. Currently there are 51 Democrats, 49 Republicans and 2 independents who usually side with the Democrats. However, because filibusters are common for any major piece of legislation considered in the Senate, a mere majority is not enough to move legislation through the process. In order to truly control legislation in this congressional chamber, a party needs to have enough members to invoke cloture (which ends a filibuster and requires a vote to be taken) — or 60 Senators.

What’s at stake?

In November, 35 Senate seats will be voted on. Of these seats, 12 are returning Democrats and 25 are Republicans. With regard to the Republican seats, five are considered open (Colorado, Idaho, Nebraska, New Mexico and Virginia) because the incumbents are retiring. Historically, open seats are much harder to defend than those in which an incumbent is running again. The Democrats have no open seats. Just looking at the math, one can see the Republicans are going to have a steeper hill to climb than their counterparts.

The battleground

Most pundits agree that the Virginia seat currently held by Sen. John Warner will likely turn Democratic with a win by former governor Mark War-
ner (no relation). Also, the Colorado seat held by Sen. Wayne Allard is very vulnerable due to his own legal problems and faces a likely contentious primary race. In New Hampshire, an expected rematch against incumbent John Sununu and former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen could be very close. When they last ran against each other, Sununu barely eked out a victory.

Two other sitting Senators come from left-leaning states — Sens. Susan Collins (Maine) and Gordon Smith (Oregon). However, they will probably in the end retain their seats. Finally, there is always one surprising race, and that is in Minnesota where Sen. Norm Coleman will likely be challenged by satirist and comedian Al Franken. Polls show this race to be close.

But the Democrats do have two races that could be close — Sens. Mary Landrieu in Louisiana and Tim Johnson in South Dakota. However, it is anticipated that the Democratic Party will be able to throw extra money into these races and therefore likely will hold onto these seats.

What’s going to happen?

In a recent national survey of likely voters, Democrats held a 14-point (54 percent to 42 percent) lead over Republicans. In addition, recent polls show 11 seats held by the Republicans to be either leaning Democrat or within the margin of error of the poll. Further, the president’s extremely high disapproval rating (more than 50 percent) is going to spill over into congressional races.

Taking all this into consideration, my crystal ball tells me that the Democrats will pick up four to six Senate seats. While still not hitting that magic number of 60, at 57 they would be extremely close.