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**Capitol View
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**Counting Colors, Election Speculation Has Begun**

“How do Democrats get elected in Nebraska? When Republicans are divided.”

That’s the opening line of a fundraising letter from Nebraska Republican Party State Chairman Dan Welch.

“In fact, disagreements between Republicans helped launch the careers of Bob Kerrey in 1982 and Ben Nelson in 1990. Both served as Governor and went on to cast decisive votes to further Democrat policies in the United States Senate,” Welch continued.

Republican incumbent Charles Thone lost to Kerrey after surviving a primary race against four competitors including: former North Platte Mayor Robert Phares; Millionaire Kimball oilman Stan Juelfs; former Nebraska Wesleyan President Vance Rogers of Lincoln and locomotive engineer Richard Hedrick of Waverly.

Republican incumbent Kay Orr lost to Nelson after giving away the farm to then Omaha-based ConAgra, which had threatened to leave the state without the passage of a massive tax support measure (LB775). The measure passed but Orr couldn’t overcome the negative backlash and was handily defeated by Nelson.

Welch didn’t mention Jim Exon who defeated Republican incumbent Norbert Tiemann after he was forced to implement a new state sales and income tax to provide the money to run state government. Voters had eliminated the tax system in the same election that put the Wausa banker in office. He admitted he had to do the unpopular thing that cost him his political future.

Exon served as Governor from 1971 to 1979 and was elected U.S. Senator from 1979 to 1997. The Democrat Exon never lost an election. He is the only Nebraskan other than George W. Norris, the architect of Nebraska's unicameral legislature, to win five consecutive statewide elections.

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But enough history, albeit important. What about today when we talk red vs. blue instead of Republican vs. Democrat?

Following Nebraska’s recent messy Republican primary, unofficial tallies from the Secretary of State’s Office show Republican candidates leading in two legislative districts now held by Democrats, while a Democrat leads in one district held by a Republican. If that holds through the general election, Republicans will have 33 seats in the 49-member Legislature, most likely making debates filibuster-proof and enough to push through controversial bills.

Nebraska Democratic Party chair Jane Kleeb said she’s confident of keeping all 17 seats currently held by Democrats and possibly adding one or two.

“There’s lots of potential of red to blue,” she said. “I’m not worried that we’re going to lose any seats.”

Nebraska Republican Party Executive Director Taylor Gage is equally bullish about the GOP’s showing in the primary and optimistic about the general election.

“Obviously we started off in a really strong position,” he said. “We’re going to pick up seats in November.”

The Nebraska Legislature is nonpartisan, meaning that candidates appear on the ballot without party labels and political parties play no official role in the legislative process. But increasingly the parties and the incumbent governor do get involved in elections and, within the Legislature, votes on some high-profile issues split along generally partisan lines.

Kleeb said the heated Republican gubernatorial primary brought out more Republican voters than Democrats for the primary. That inflated totals for Republican candidates in the primary but is unlikely to be repeated in November. In both Douglas and Lancaster counties, the number of Republican ballots cast equaled about 43% of that party’s registrations, while the number of Democratic ballots cast was closer to 30% of party registrations.

In addition, national interest in two Nebraska congressional races will likely focus on getting more Democrats to vote. The Omaha-area race pitting Democrat State Sen. Tony Vargas against the GOP incumbent, Rep. Don Bacon, has the potential to flip a seat. Likewise, Democrats will

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also focus on getting term-limited Democratic State Senator Patty Pansing-Brooks elected to the Congressional seat recently held by Republican Jeff Fortenberry who resigned after being convicted of campaign finance violations.

“Progressive issues on the ballot help,” Kleeb said. Pending the outcome of petition drives, voters may be asked to increase the minimum wage and legalize medical marijuana.

Gage said Republicans have more candidates, including for all the state’s top elected positions and 23 of the 24 legislative races. University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen, a Republican, squares off against Democrat State Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue in the governor’s race.

Come November, will we be seeing redder or maybe a splash of blue?

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